

Remembering Datuk Dr Goh Cheng Teik

An illustrious son of St Xavier's, an honest and hardworking politician

By Dr Francis Loh Kok Wah

It is with much sadness and a heavy heart that we in the St Xavier's Institution family - comprising our Director Bro Anthony Rogers, the Principal Dr Sim Hock Keat, the Teachers, Staff, Students, Old Xaverians and the Board of Governors and Managers - learn of the passing of Datuk Dr Goh Cheng Teik.

He was one of our most illustrious sons who was Head Prefect of his alma mater. He was an excellent student and won a scholarship to Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There, he excelled as well, winning various prizes including the honour of being the Valecdictorian at his graduation.

From Harvard, Cheng Teik went to Oxford where he obtained a Masters. Armed with Harvard and Oxford degrees, he returned to Malaysia and assumed a lecturership in the Department of History, University of Malaya. Subsequently, he completed his PhD at Leiden University, Holland.

So Cheng Teik studied not only in St Xavier's Institution but in three of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the world!

Perhaps his most important publication is *The May 13 Incident and Democracy in Malaysia*, a slim monograph published by Oxford University Press where he analysed that tragic event and warned us of the dangers of extremism, and advocated for consensus and moderation

Shortly thereafter, he quit the university and went into politics. A strong believer in multiracialism, and in working for reforms from within, Cheng Teik shunned the ethnic-based parties and joined the newly-minted multi-ethnic Parti Gerakan Malaysia.

He was a five-term Nibong Tebal MP (1974-90, 1995-1999) and a one-term Sungai Bakap assemblyperson (1990-1995). He was appointed deputy minister to various ministries, and held the Local Government portfolio as a State Executive Councillor.

I have no doubt that Cheng Teik was capable of holding a full ministerial position. Alas, within the distribution of seats and positions system that the BN practised, Parti Gerakan was entitled to only one full federal ministerial position since it was already given the Penang State Chief Minister's post.

So, in spite of his credentials, his abilities and ambitions, Cheng Teik remained in that deputy ministerial position. He challenged then Gerakan president Lim Keng Yaik for the party presidency in 1987, and lost. A decade later, in a party feud, he challenged Koh Tzu Koon for the leadership of the Penang Gerakan, which he also lost. Thereafter, Cheng Teik retired from politics.

Apparently, he became an adjunct professor at Sunway University and did some lecturing and more writing. Unfortunately, soon after, Parkinson's disease set in and Cheng Teik began battling with the disease for some 15 years. Parkinson's slowed him down considerably but did not prevent him from continuing to attend events he considered important and meaningful.

I remember sitting next to him at the same dinner table on the occasion of Lim Kit Siang's Birthday Anniversary in Penang in the Equatorial Hotel. I remember that he had to excuse himself halfway through the dinner because he had grown tired and was losing his focus, whereupon his son accompanied him to the hotel room upstairs.

He was also present at the funeral of Rev Bro Charles Levin, a former Bro Director of St Xavier's and a former teacher of his. The funeral was in Oct 2012 and was held in the Chapel in St Xavier's Institution. Cheng Teik spotting a dark sweater to keep himself warm. He must have made very special effort to be present. I remember chatting a bit with him and we had agreed to exchange articles that each of us had written on Malaysian politics.

The last time I saw Cheng Teik was at the funeral of Bro Felix Donohue held in June 2017. But I didn't get a chance to talk to him. That funeral was in the St Francis Xavier's Church in Jalan Gasing, Petaling Jaya, where Cheng Teik's own funeral was to be held today.

Incidentally, the first time that I met him was when I interviewed him in his deputy minister's office. That must have been in 1981. My colleague Dr Johan Saravanamuttu and I were conducting research on 'Political Leadership in Malaysia' and were keen to interview Cheng Teik and other leaders.

All three of us were Penang boys, had been Head Prefects in St Xavier's Institution, and yes, all three had studied Political Science too! Johan and I were still teaching Politics in Universiti Sains Malaysia then. So we had lots to talk about although, as I recall, we didn't talk too much about the research topic at all!

Goh Cheng Bee, a former banker and industrialist, also my classmate in St Xavier's class of 1968/70, intimates that "My brother is best remembered as an honest and hardworking politician". And indeed, Cheng Teik was one such politician. After all, his alma mater's motto is *Labor Omnia Vincit* which translated from Latin means: "Labour conquers All"!

Indeed, he also laboured and brought much changes as the President of the Old Xaverian Association from 1985 to 2008, the longest serving president the OXA has ever had.

He was also someone who detested the extremists and religious bigots but believed in working towards this moderation from within the system. In a way this was the original Parti Gerakan goal which was to fight for multiracialism from within BN. A noble goal but one fraught with frustrations, no doubt. And recent history has shown that regime change had to be ushered in from outside the BN.

Nonetheless, in the aftermath of May 13, Cheng Teik believed in working from within the BN. More than that, he also believed that he first learnt his moderation in school at St Xavier's. Let me end by sharing with you his thoughts on the occasion of this "double celebration" in 1977:

"Celebrating Malaysia" by Datuk Dr Goh Cheng Teik (then deputy Minister of Works and Utilities)

Within the time span of one week, we are commemorating two memorable events: the foundation of St Xavier's one hundred and twenty five ago and the birth of Malaysia twenty

years ago. I speak for every Xaverian and La Sallian present in this hall when I say that we celebrate both anniversaries with equal spontaneity and enthusiasm.

I can speak so confidently because I know from direct personal experience that a La Sallian education makes its recipient a good citizen not only of Malaysia but also the world at large.

On the day he enrolls, he learns that God made him. He also learns that God made others too. Hence, all men are children of God, whatever their skin colour, racial origin or speech may be.

In other words, a La Sallian school is a nursery for Malaysian citizenship. No La Sallian is taught to nurse any wounded racial pride or to glorify the mythical greatness of any race. Each day at school, he has a chance to practice this philosophy. He studies and plays with youngsters of every ethnic origin. By the time he leaves school, he has learnt what it is to live together in one big Malaysian family!

Since the war, over ¾ million students have passed through La Salle schools in both East and West Malaysia.So far however, this enormous potential force for moderation has not yet been harnessed....At this critical juncture of Malaysia's evolution as a nation, the La Sallian alumni cannot afford to be bystanders. The racial extremists and chauvinists have committed themselves towards their sectarian goals. We as moderate nationalists must also commit ourselves to our Malaysian ideals. We must stand up and be counted in the battle for a United Malaysia and a Fair and Just Society for all.

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21 March 2019