

# Oh Malaysia, it's time to make some changes

Speakeasy

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AT the stroke of midnight, the Union Jack began coming down the flagpole while one, on a nearby pole, in red, white, yellow and blue began ascending.

When it reached its apex, a tune resounded through the stadium and the assembled throng, not recognising either emblem, realised what either was and spontaneously stood up to an almighty cheer.

On Thursday last 60 years ago, Malaya was born. According to the World Health Organisation, 60 is still a relatively young age. But to my generation, born a year before independence, it seems a lifetime ago.

By any stretch of the imagination, we've done reasonably well for ourselves. If we take basic living indicators, for example, our results place us among the developed nations. I refer here to yardsticks like infant mortality and longevity rates, disease eradication and the quality of life.

The problem about the latter parameter is that life, as the late Lee Kuan Yew might have observed, is "hardly fair". It is true that for the common man, life is getting increasingly difficult. Between the higher cost of living and a grossly undervalued ringgit, he generally finds himself trapped between a rock and a hard place. And that, as my father faced with



**Nice place to retire:** An aerial view of Penang ferry terminal in George Town. Expatriates are seriously considering retirement in Malaysia, preferably in Penang or Langkawi.

the sole burden of feeding and educating five children, once confided in me, is "not a nice place to be at all".

But he only told me this well after his retirement and when most of us had become reasonably established. For our part, we never, ever thought we were poor.

Far from it. In fact, we may have even deluded ourselves with the notion that we "were more than okay". And that's Malaysia for you.

That's why it works very well for the other classes. I have lost count of the number of expatriates who've told me that they were seriously considering retirement

here, preferably in Penang or Langkawi.

For all its detractors, even our economy is fairly robust. I mean, short of a 2009-type global crisis, we are not about to fall off any cliff.

But we could do, oh-so-much better. For one thing, we could

stop being so much of a cliché.

In India, you throw a stone and it might hit a cow or a software engineer. Here, you throw a stone and it invariably hits a Datuk.

Our civic-mindedness could also do with a kick in its pants. I have nothing against investing in four-digit bets, but why do people feel compelled to litter the roads and the sidewalks with their betting slips?

Or carelessly dump garbage on the roadside? Or worse? We were coming home late one night when we saw a man on a motorbike attempting to dump garbage down a ravine along a hilly stretch in Ampang. Only after we stopped and hollered at him, did he scurry off looking shame-faced. But how long had he, and others like him, been doing it?

I like Lat because he portrays Malaysia in a way most of us think it should be: an innocent country, free from the ancient race hatreds and historical baggage that continue to plague us to this very day. The wolf, we are continually being reminded, is always at our door.

Even Sultan Nazrin Shah pointed this out last week, observing that Tun Abdul Razak would be "heartbroken" if he were around to witness the current state of the nation, a full six decades after independence.

Let's stop blaming the British or the Americans and each other for our present condition. Yes, we can change and we might start with ourselves.

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