

The 13th Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration: Whether Training in Medicine Makes a Better Politician[†]

I would like to thank the Singapore Academy of Medicine for the honour to deliver the Professor G A Ransome oration for this year. I am not really qualified to give an oration though I have talked my way to some prominence as a politician. So you must excuse me if I don't sound erudite and academically qualified. You must blame those people who insisted that I deliver this prestigious oration.

The subject "Whether Training in Medicine Makes a Better Politician" is from a list submitted to me because I really could not think of anything suitable to talk about. I thought since I am both a former practitioner of medicine and a current politician, there would be something that I am acquainted with about both subjects.

Many people had asked me how a doctor (a medical doctor, not one of those PhDs masquerading as doctors) became a politician. I wondered about it myself. But being inclined to be facetious, I invariably implied that actually I was a politician who qualified as a doctor. I didn't really decide to be one. But the only available scholarship was for medicine. I had to take it or become a clerk in the Kedah Government Service. I couldn't become a clerk because I needed prestige in order to be accepted as a political leader. A university qualification would provide that prestige. I thought law would do fine. It would take only three years and in those days you had to study in England. And I did so want to see the so-called mother of the British Empire. Unfortunately or fortunately there was no scholarship available for me. So I went overseas, i.e. across the Straits of Johore to study medicine.

Looking back now I think it was rather good training for a politician. It started with being ragged, and then ragging others, which at the King Edward VII College of Medicine tended to be prolonged. I don't think I really enjoyed being ragged. But the pay-off is that for at least 5 years I could rag others, which I enjoyed enormously. I don't know whether I am kidding myself but I did learn a lot about human nature while being ragged and while ragging others. A little kindness for a badgered freshie seemed to make such a difference to him. The same, I think, applies to most people who feel harassed by an unkind world. They appreciate the milk of human kindness much more than those who had never known what it meant to be poor and deprived. Practising as a private doctor later, I learnt to understand and sympathise with the downtrodden much more easily. I learnt to understand that the handicapped need to be compensated, that playing fields are not always level, and that even when they are level, the size of the contestants counts. I would prescribe ragging in order to **make doctors** and people in general appreciate the pressure others felt. I would prescribe being ragged to help cultivate a sense of humility. But unfortunately far too many of the senior gentlemen tended to be sadistic and enjoyed inflicting physical and mental pain. And so we should find some other ways to instil humility and a sense of caring among future doctors and people.

On the second day of my arrival at the College I passed the anatomy lab and saw the white shrouds covering the bodies on the dissecting table. I went back to my room trembling. I had been brought up to fear death, most of all the dead bodies. I did not like to see drawings of human skeletons even. The idea that I would have to see, touch and dissect dead human bodies was simply terrifying. I wanted to give up, to run away. Medicine was not for me. Slowly I calmed down, struggling with my fears. I would like to say that common sense prevailed and I overcame my fears. But actually it was the idea that those petite little medical girls carving up dead bodies which shamed me. If they could, surely I could too. The next day I asked a senior gentleman to take me to the lab and show me the bodies. I saw and I laid my hands on the body of a man, cold and smelling of formalin. He was very dead and I couldn't think of him doing me any harm. I lost my fear then. I no longer shuddered at the thought of cutting up the bodies. It was a lesson for me. I could later go to bed with a human skull, trying to memorise the route of those confusing cranial nerves. I would fall asleep and wake up late at night with the skull grinning at me. I felt no fear. I had no nightmares.

The experience helped to strengthen my nerves. Later, while serving in Langkawi I suddenly realised what mortality means for me, but I was able to overcome fear of death much more quickly. When I had to have heart surgery the "yes" came easily. Unlike lay people doctors know exactly what heart surgery meant. It is not edifying to know that someone would use an electric saw to split your chest and then stop your heart while they improve on their needlework. I was scared. But deciding to go through with it was not difficult. Kuala Lumpur or the Mayo Clinic made no difference. When your number is up, you go. For me who believes, it is what Allah wills that matters. If He wills that I should be on my way, that's it. I tied up my proverbial camel and left the rest to Him.

[†] Speech delivered by The Prime Minister of Malaysia, The Honourable Dato Seri Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad

But understanding what mortality means and being always conscious of it is important for people as a whole and politicians in particular. The fact that there is no running away from it and that one day one has to go, and one cannot take things along to the other world helps to stave off greed and the desire to abuse political power, particularly to abuse it for pecuniary gains. Wealth can only be enjoyed in this world and the enjoyment can only be rather temporary. As you get older the sense of temporariness becomes more acute.

Lots of people of course believe that as a politician I must be corrupt. Why? If they were in my place they would be corrupt. They would after all be only obeying the maxim that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. So if they would accept bribes, surely this guy cannot be a paragon of virtue and not accept bribes. But I can assure you that mortality, the temporariness of life in this world, the absolute awareness that you cannot take it with you, act as great deterrents, at least for me. More than other members of the human society, doctors understand death, the finality of it.

Believe it or not, conscious of my mortality, I have always felt that the temporary pleasures of this world are not really worth the opprobrium and detestation of people of the future, after I am dead and buried. I would rather forego filthy lucre, made more so by being ill gotten, in order to keep my name clean. I am not looking for a pedestal in history, but I hope that my children and grandchildren would not have cause to be ashamed of me for my avarice and lack of principle.

Of my father's children I inherited more wealth than the others, not in terms of property but in terms of education. My brothers and sisters are poor, which is why many don't even know that I have two elder sisters and two elder brothers. My brothers only had secondary education. One sister had Malay school education and one sister was denied entry into the Government Girls English School in Alor Star because she was the daughter of a low grade Government employee.

I went to college, and qualified as a doctor. So I was more fortunate, richer. Remembering this I ensure the education and training of my children. They are able to look after themselves now. They don't need my help any more. So they don't need a good inheritance. I don't have to accumulate wealth for them.

I think my training as a doctor helps me get a better perspective of life and what it all means. And I think that training is good for a politician.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author and creator of Sherlock Holmes, was a medical doctor. Clearly a doctor can make a good author. But the medical discipline also helps one to become a politician, sometimes maybe a good politician. When I was doing private practice it struck me one day, as I was writing down notes regarding a patient of mine that I was a detective like Sherlock Holmes. When his client remarked that he did not know where to begin, Holmes' invariable response was to advise the client to begin from the beginning. Where upon the client would narrate what had happened to him in some detail. Holmes would ask questions to elicit details. The client was in fact telling Holmes of his complaints and Holmes then tried to get a coherent history of these complaints. He could then look for evidence, material evidence and he did some elementary lab test. And after further investigations, examining various possibilities he solved the mystery.

Thinking it over I concluded that it was not I playing at being a detective. It was Holmes who was playing at being a doctor for the method he used to solve his mysteries or cases was every bit like those of a doctor trying to diagnose his patients' ailments. Naturally Holmes used the medical approach because he was a creature created by a doctor—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

I am not trying to explain that a doctor would make a good detective or a detective would make a good doctor. What I am trying to say is that a doctor is trained to solve problems, his patients' ailments, through a systematic process of collecting information, sifting through them, testing, making a diagnosis and then prescribing the remedy. That is also what a politician is supposed to do. He has to make an analysis of the problem and having diagnosed it prescribe a remedy. The problem may be his own or the community's or the nation's. He may want to know why he is unpopular and having discovered why, find a remedy. The community may be at odds with itself, unstable and incapable of progressing. By the method of gathering as much information as possible, doing some tests, for example through a by-election or passing some laws, a politician, especially one in power can make a conclusion. A remedy can then be prescribed.

When I wrote "The Malay Dilemma" I was doing just that. Why did the Malays dislike the Chinese? The answer was fear—fear of being swamped and dispossessed by the richer and more worldly Chinese. Why were the Chinese unfriendly towards the Malays? The answer was again fear. The British had said that in independent Malaysia the Malays would have unlimited political power—and they would take away what belonged to the Chinese. Having diagnosed fear, the remedy was to remove it. You are right. It was easier said than done. The remedy was the New Economic Policy with the central objective of first, eradicating poverty among all, I repeat all, racial groups and

secondly, to remove the identification of race with economic functions—Malays as padi farmers and fishermen, Chinese as businessmen and Indians as rubber tappers. Wealth was to be redistributed not according to racial composition but reasonably—30 per cent for the Malays who made up more than 50 per cent of the population, 40 per cent for the Chinese who made up 32 per cent, and 30 per cent for foreigners. The redistribution was not to be through expropriation from the wealthy-Robinhood style—but by stimulating economic growth and distributing the resulting bigger economic cake.

No one really believed it of course, but over the years the prescription had been seriously applied. The different races swallowed the pills and slowly fear began to dissipate—among the Malays and among the Chinese. It would seem to have been the correct diagnosis and the correct prescription. Today Malaysia is stable, secure and prosperous. The Malays and the Chinese have not been and are not at each other's throats. And they are not likely to do so in the foreseeable future. The methodical approach of the doctors seems to have worked.

Well could not a lawyer have done the same? I don't really know. Most countries have lawyers for leaders. Some have succeeded, some haven't.

Between doctors and lawyers there is a great difference in terms of perception. A doctor studies a problem, the disease of the patient, in order to diagnose what it really is and to provide the best remedy. A lawyer looks at a problem based on which side he is on. If he is prosecuting then he sees it only from the point of view of getting a conviction. He may know that the defendant is innocent but that is irrelevant. He must prove that the defendant is guilty. He looks for those aspects of the complaints, history and evidence, including lab test which will prove that the defendant is guilty. If the evidence are overwhelming that the defendant is innocent he does not drop the case. He will try to prove the defendant guilty *inspite* of everything. That was what he was hired for and that was what he would do. But the same lawyer, having left the DPP's office, looks at this client in a totally different light. Sure he is guilty as H-L but that is irrelevant. He must prove his client innocent. Anyway if he can get around the law, he will do so. And so many are the criminals who escape their just desserts while many who may be innocent are made to pay the price. A good lawyer is one who can get a conviction or a discharge depending on who engages him. A lawyer politician would do the same I suppose.

Doctors want to get at the truth so they can provide a cure. They make mistakes of course and as the cynics say their victims end six feet down, whereas with a clever lawyer their victims end six feet up. Lawyers are not too concerned about the truth. They determine their goals first, to seek acquittal or to find the person guilty, and then they work with this objective in mind.

Some years back I told the correspondent of the greatest British economic magazine, the name of which I shall not divulge, that I find running a country quite easy because I am trained as a doctor. I told him all about Arthur Conan Doyle hoping to impress him. His subsequent article in that esteemed journal was full of raw cynicism. He said that, "now Dr Mahathir will learn that running Malaysia would not be as easy as prescribing a cure for his patients". Well, that was some years ago. For the past eight years Malaysia has been growing at eight per cent with very low inflation rate. I am sure this growth would have been attributed by the learned journalist to an annual series of good luck. But then journalists know more about how to run a country than all the Presidents and Prime Ministers put together. Even a cub reporter is better equipped to rule a nation than any professional politician. Without journalists to tell us what to do, we politicians would be utterly lost. That is why I always read the economic and political magazines before deciding what not to do to my country. Malaysia will be safe if we don't do what the journalists are convinced we should do.

Engineers, architects and accountants may make better politicians than doctors. But I have not seen many of them leading countries. So I am not in a position to say who is better, doctors or the rest of the other professionals.

Then of course there was the Italian Lady of the Night, Cicolina, I think her name was. She was properly elected and showed her mettle. Also there is the Bandit Queen. It is difficult to compare them with doctors since the sample is so small. Actors and comedians too have run for office and have succeeded. One actor became the President of a great country. In politics a lot of people get a chance to act and I am sure actors act better. If you think democracy is a joke, electing comedians would complement your views. In politics there are many jokers.

You see, to become an office boy you need some educational qualification or certificate. To become a politician you need no qualification at all. Illiterates and dropouts may rise to any level in the political hierarchy and may do very well. But doctors do have many advantages. Diseases do not recognise ranks or sex or occupation or age. From the day you are born to the day you make your exit, you cannot but have contact with doctors. Only the complete imbecile among them would fail to understand something about human nature. And in a democratic system knowing human nature helps politicians to succeed.

I was a General Practitioner and I met a fair section of the people who later on became my voters. There were

thousands of them. Lawyers, architects, accountants, engineers do get to meet people but by comparison with doctors their clients are small in number. Besides, they do not bare their hearts to other professionals as they do to doctors.

Ordinary people are only interested in themselves. This is particularly so with patients. If you listen to a conversation between two patients as they wait their turns to see the doctor, you will understand how uninterested they are in each other's problem.

The conversation will go somewhat like this:

A: I have this excruciating pain in the stomach.

B: Yes, mine is worse. A pain in the stomach is alright but I have this terrible headache which makes me want to commit suicide.

A: Oh, but my stomach pain is different.

B: Yes, yes of course. But this is

And so it goes on, the one not really hearing the other, each only concerned about his own private pain, completely convinced that he is worse than the other. There is no sympathy-no real sympathy for the other, each wishing that the other would appreciate that his ailment is far more serious.

We are all like that. We are not really interested in other people's medical problem. Then your turn comes to see the doctor, you discover that here is a person who is totally absorbed with your complaint. Not only does he listen to your tales of sorrow but he actually asks questions about them. You can feel he is not only interested but he is actually concerned. So different from all the others, who only want to tell you about their complaints, as if you don't have your own to worry about. And you warm up to the doctor. Great people, doctors. If they stand for election, why, I would certainly vote for them.

And the doctors eventually learn to understand people, their problems, their trials and tribulations. I know how unpleasant was the life in the villages where my patients lived. They had no roads, no water, no electricity, no schools, no health clinics no nothing. I learnt how to sympathise with them, to really feel for them, to want to do something for them. If they had no money, they could pay later. If they didn't, you really shouldn't be so insistent. After all as private practitioners you were already earning more than you were earning as Medical Officers.

Understanding human nature can be extremely helpful for politicians. In a democracy where popularity determines whether you succeed or fail, it is even more important. It is not just about getting votes. It is also about getting the support for the things you want to do which you think is good for the people and the nation.

One would have thought that if what you want to do is good for the people they would support you. But very frequently they don't. To win them over you have to understand them, their thinking and their priorities. Providing a school for a village seems like a welcome project. But there is the question of the exact location, whose land you have to acquire, where the teachers have to live and all kinds of details. If you don't heed the views of these people you will not only be unable to get your school built but you will lose support in the process. Yes it is important to understand people and doctors understand them better than most other professionals.

As I said, running a nation involves solving problems. Developing a nation also involves solving a thousand and one problems. So does managing foreign relations, internal affairs etc. All of them have to be handled methodically. And doctors have a tidy mind even if their cluttered desks suggest otherwise. Using the methods of diagnosis and treatment with which doctors are familiar, other problems can be resolved and straightened.

So I think doctors with their training make better politicians. Maybe not the best but pretty good anyway. At least as a doctor I think so. Admittedly, I am biased. But then everyone is biased.

I hope more doctors will take up politics. We have four doctors in the Malaysian Cabinet. But I don't foresee a rush among you to forsake medicine. Politics doesn't pay half as well i.e. if you are straight. If money is what you go for, avoid politics like the plague. If you don't you may rise to the top and then probably land in a court facing charges of corruption or abuse of power, medical training notwithstanding.

I have said a mouthful and now I should shut up.

Thank you for the honour of speaking at this Professor G A Ransome oration by the Academy of Medicine of Singapore.

Thank you.