

I, Elite

Reflections on the Centennial Medical Dinner held at the Istana, 3 July 2005



I was uncomfortable sitting under this huge tent in all the heat and humidity afforded by a Singapore July evening. But I could not complain. For onstage, was an octogenarian standing patiently under the glare of multiple spotlights. I can only surmise that it was far hotter and a lot more uncomfortable for him. He stood there while his citation was read. The citation was reasonably long, but still manifestly inadequate for such an illustrious life.

And so there he stood. Memories of me as a young man cutting tutorials to attend the last Fullerton Square Rally during the December 1984 General Elections came back to me. I had managed to move right next to the make-shift stage where he stood and delivered his rally speech. I even brought my camera along to take photographs...

Finally it was over. He then took over the rostrum. I had always been captivated when he spoke. Rumour has it that when I saw him speak on black and white TV as a toddler decades ago, I would sit there, point at the TV and babble, "Ah Yew, Ah Yew". Of course, with adulthood, I had no desire to repeat such a disrespectful gesture that night.

It was not a very long speech (at least not by his standards). But in many ways, many parts of the speech were redemptive, reaffirming, if not cathartic:

"The cream of the students from English schools in the Straits Settlements, the Malay States and the Borneo Territories sought admission to Medical College."

"The Medical College has consistently been able to attract many of our brightest students."

"...many of our best have not been through our universities, except for medicine."

At the end of the speech, he departed from his prepared text and commented that probably all doctors wanted their children to also become doctors for reasons that a medical career brought along a comfortable life, good income and high status. He further commented that we now had three doctor-ministers in the government, which, considering the long medical training they had been subjected to, was not an efficient way of producing political leaders for the country. He challenged all present (probably mostly doctors) to think through this: if all of the brightest went to Medical School in Singapore, how would the leadership needs of Singapore be met in other areas?¹

Here I am, a local NUS graduate so many years ago, sitting day-in, day-out, in my old HDB clinic seeing patients walking in and out every day. And almost choked out by the thorns of a 21st century life as a GP: rents, declining patient load, unreasonable patients, rising medical indemnity insurance costs, clinic assistant issues, ever tougher CME requirements and health regulation laws, the temptation to make an easy buck, and so on.

And then it all came back. *Gosh, I am a member of an elite group: the local Medical School.* We doctors are NOT that irresponsible bunch of professionals the press sometimes

makes doctors out to be; the clueless people some terrible patients try to infer we are; or the difficult and insular technical folks some administrators like to portray some of my colleagues holding senior positions in public healthcare.

Maybe, we can even consider ourselves to be elites – like overseas PSC, SAF and EDB scholars and Administrative Service Officers

But really, what is 'elite'? 'Elite' is described as "the best (of a group)", "select group or class"².

However, 'elite' is different from the two words it is often linked to: 'Elitism' and 'Establishment'. 'Elitism' is defined as "recourse to or advocacy of leadership or dominance by a select group" and (The) 'Establishment' is described as (a) "social group with authority or influence and resisting change"².

Unlike some other elite groupings, the medical profession must never succumb to elitism or an establishment mindset. The profession must not seek to dominate over others, or resist change. Leadership has to embrace change and be founded on service.

Look no further than ourselves to understand what it takes to be elite but not elitist: "not pride of knowledge, but humility in wisdom"³; "not to be ministered unto, but to minister"⁴; "to strive, to seek, to serve"⁵.

The Hobbit wondered if other 'elite' groups shared common values of ministry, service, and humility. So he went to the website of one of these most 'elite' of 'elite' groups. He looked under the heading "What You Need" to join this group. And here are some excerpts from the website:

"You should have a First or Second Class Upper Honours degree from one of our local universities or a reputable overseas university. Proven track records, leadership qualities are essential."

"You should also possess several defining characteristics such as creativity, drive and decisiveness, combined with the desire to contribute to the (organisation)."

I suppose the noblest expressions you can find here is "desire to contribute to the (organisation)" and "leadership qualities".

There is no mention of leadership based on service and humility.

We must never go this way. Or how else can we still be considered as being among "the best" by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew himself?

Yes, after almost 21 years, it all came back quite clearly that night when he spoke again. ■

References:

1. *These comments were not part of the prepared speech available on the public website and are to the best of what The Hobbit can recall. The Hobbit apologises unreservedly for any inadvertent inaccuracies.*
2. *Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 1998 Edition.*
3. *Motto of NUS Medical School.*
4. *Motto of (NUS Medical, Dental and Pharmacy) Alumni Association, taken from Mark 10:45.*
5. *Motto of King Edward VII Hall.*