

Other People's Money

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

One chilly evening in Bayswater, London, years back, I was approached by a distressed mother with a hungry baby asking for a few pounds to buy a train ticket back home to Edinburgh, Scotland. The mother explained that they had been robbed and were penniless. I obliged with the few pounds. After a further short walk down the busy Bayswater sidewalk, I chanced on the mother and child again, this time loading up into a van filled with similar such pairings, looking less distraught than when they had approached me. Later I was to learn that this was a common racket to get hapless suckers like me to part with our money.

In this month's *SMA News*, the Hobbit discusses altruism and charity, alluding to the recent National Kidney Foundation (NKF) saga that fibrillated the heart of the nation for a brief shining moment in a burst of media glare. I also had the privilege of meeting with a director in the litigation department of Drew and Napier, Mr Adrian Tan, who assisted Senior Counsel Davinder Singh as defendant lawyers in the defamation lawsuit by NKF CEO Mr TT Durai against Singapore Press Holdings. The voice of the people shrilled through the democratising technology of the Internet, especially in blogs, internet chatrooms, conventional media websites and more. The sentiments were expressed in languages ranging from the Queen's English to Singlish to Hokkien and other ethnic expletives. They reflected some of our citizens' undercurrent anger and disappointment. The virtual People Power included an online petition calling for the resignation of the NKF CEO which was hailed in one local news commentary as a healthy move towards Singapore becoming a more civil society.

When starving French people at the cusp of the French Revolution cried out for food, Queen Marie Antoinette purportedly replied, "Let them eat cake." She never actually made that remark. Hence it was unfair to have attributed this insensitive quote to her, unpopular though she may have been. Similarly, in the NKF saga, it is important to allow the legal process to take its course and establish fact from fiction amidst all the noise that has surrounded this case, jingles, lampoons and all. Nevertheless, I do not think Singaporeans expect CEOs of charity organisations to live a spartan life of self denial like dhoti-clad, goat-curd-eating former Indian lawyer, Mahatma Gandhi, "CEO" of post-independence India.

There is a flamboyant African-American pastor by the name of Pastor Creflo A Dollar who runs an international church ministry called the World Changers Church International (WCCI). The church has 25,000 members and

US\$70 million in annual budget. Thirty million dollars go into television every year. According to a *Business Week* report, Pastor Dollar owns two Rolls Royce cars and flies about in a Gulfstream-3 private jet. To his critics, he is nicknamed "Pass the Dollar" and "Cashflow Dollar". The church accounts are audited by a top accounting firm, Grant Thornton. One Rolls Royce was given to him by the church congregation as they wanted him to drive only the best car. Traditionalists in the vein of Reverend Martin Luther King have criticised Pastor Dollar for putting money before ministry. "Obiang" though he might be, Pastor Dollar never said he would enter his church on a donkey or a tricycle, and his people celebrate his grand Rolls Royce entrance as a great blessing consistent with his Prosperity Gospel. In this instance, transparency and accountability appear to have prevailed in WCCI.

On a recent July flight to Hong Kong for a medical meeting, I was able to take in page after page of the NKF saga in the *Straits Times*. At the same time, I was watching an inflight movie called "Millions", a gem of a film by Danny "Trainspotting" Boyle. This film tells the story of two young brothers, 7-year-old Damian and 9-year-old Anthony, who have been grieving over the death of their mother, when a suitcase full of money (over 200,000 pounds) literally lands on their lap.

Damian is the naïve, angelic innocent who believes in God and that everything works for good, and holds surreal conversations with quirky saints from the past. He goes around giving this newfound money away to needy people. However, "blur-like-sotong" Damian is not in his school's in-crowd and seems alone in the school corners. In a tough, gritty midlands English town filled with danger and opportunists, he almost appears autistic and vulnerable.

Anthony is the streetwise, EQ-savvy, anxious and cynical older brother who is keen to grow the money through investments such as buying real estate. He is able to buy loyalty and alliances with his peers, and often chides Damian for mindlessly giving the money away, fearing depletion of their stash of cash. In one scene, their mother appears to Damian (as Saint Maureen) and tells him to forgive his older brother's anger, tension, lack of humanity and manipulative behaviour as that was Anthony's grief reaction over the death of their mother. "Millions" thankfully avoids being the sentimental cheeseball that dogs many Hollywood productions.

This simple tale ends with a celebration of life, and affirms that a greater good can be achieved when other people's money is invested and used wisely, sometimes by the least likely but the best of persons. ■

