Remembering a colossus

ICON OF INTEGRITY:
Confronting graft decisively ranks among Lee Kuan Yew’s greatest achievements

He was born into a middle class third generation Chinese family. An outstanding all-round student, he attended Raffles College, a contemporary of Tun Abdul Razak Hussein. He attended Cambridge in 1946 to read law at Fitzwilliam College where he obtained a double first in law. While in Singapore he fell in love with Kwa Geok Choo, a top scholar at Raffles College, who followed him to Cambridge a year later to read law.

Lee, who was nothing if not self-opinionated, had that beguiling streak of justifiable and forgivable immodesty about his own cleverness. He was constrained to admit that Kwa was "a very bright girl, brighter than I was." That coming from him was high praise, indeed.

He was very much in love with Choo, the name by which he called her. They married secretly in England before returning to Singapore. She turned out to be an exceptional wife and companion to him and mother to their children. She died in 2010.

As a student at Cambridge he came under the influence of British labour politics. He was greatly impressed with many of the “socialist ideas at work” — public housing, for example, which had been put into effect in post-war Britain by the Labour government.

However, he did not approve of the British welfare state. He viewed that as a levelling down process that had made the average Briton lazy and too dependent on the state. When he became Prime Minister of Singapore, public housing became his number one priority: it also became the envy of the world.

His foray into politics during the colonial period under the People’s Action Party (PAP) banner was far from easy even for the supremely self-assured and brash Lee. Singapore was riddled with communist cells. He was quick to realise that as long as the communist threat existed, an independent Singapore would remain a gleam in his eye. Malaya’s Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Rahman, did not fully trust him, although they got along well initially.

Lee had two battles on his hands because the Malays rightly or wrongly considered Lee a Chinese chauvinist, his relentless promotion of this as the ultimate national political objective was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

For all his shrewd political instincts, Lee had totally misread the Malay psyche. He was not a racist; who, unfortunately, was perceived in the eyes of the Malays as an aggressive enemy. Patience was not Lee’s strong point. The brief period that Singapore was a constituent state of Malaysia was a tumultuous one; there was every prospect of a serious inter-racial clash breaking out that the new nation could do without.

The Tunku considered the matter more carefully and had made up his mind that Singapore should go its own way as the consequences of Singapore remaining in the Federation would be too terrible to contemplate.

What began as a political turf war was escalating rapidly into a racial conflagration that would destroy the country. When according to Lee, he asked if the Tunku would agree to a rearrangement of the relationship to avoid a complete and final separation, the Tunku said that if one had a bad leg that could turn gangrenous, one had to have it amputated. So ended an experiment in federalism that went horribly awry.

I have never made any secret of my unabashed admiration for Lee’s ethical values and his highly developed sense of duty in the public interest. On Sept 16, 2000, in a packed hall, on the occasion of the launching of the second volume of his memoirs From Third World To First in Singapore, in my dual capacity as president of Transparency International Malaysia and vice-chairman of Transparency International, I presented Senior Minister Lee the Transparency International Malaysia Global Integrity Medal.

My conferral speech drew attention to his incredible success as prime minister in stamping out corruption in Singapore and his outstanding contribution to global integrity, I highlighted the way in which he had transformed Singapore within a reasonably short time into an island of integrity. Confronting corruption decisively was his greatest legacy and inspiration to those of us engaged in the fight against civilization’s worst enemy.