

APEX CLUB OF BUKIT TIMAH CHARITY BALL

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1 Amidst the cross-current of election fever and the festive spirit of the Christmas season, I observe there are much in common between the election platforms of the opposition parties and the marketing efforts of departmental stores. The common theme being: there is a lot to be given away - if you come to us. There is something in human nature that finds it hard to resist a free give-away. People in marketing and advertising know this, and are always seeking ways to exploit this human trait in order to boost their product. "Buy one and get one free!" "Exchange these coupons for free gifts." "Get free gifts for purchases over \$50." So the cry goes on - endless variations on the same theme, over radio and television, in newspapers, in the shops.

2 Politicians know this too, and perhaps better. Thus, many of them will trade on the naivety of their audience regularly and trot out the same dog-eared promises each time the elections roll by. Free health services, free bus-rides for the poor, bigger social welfare pay-outs, free education. All this, they claim, would produce a better society, a better life for all. But would it? Or would the product be disaster and bankruptcy, or an increasingly heavy tax-load on the people?

3 For on even a superficial examination of such promises one must come to the painful conclusion that the real problem lies not in what to achieve, but how to achieve it, while trying to avoid undesirable repercussions.

4 Any marketing man could tell you that free gifts are never really free. They cost money to produce and this cost must be met from somewhere. Perhaps lower wages or a more expensive product.

5 Social services too have a cost. Few countries in the world can afford the luxury of a cradle-to-the-grave welfare system. One such country is Sweden, famed for its comprehensive social services. But Sweden has the highest per capita GNP in the world and also a tax structure that places a heavy burden on the average worker. For the cost of the welfare services in this case is high taxes. Despite their social service programmes, the government party lost the general election recently after almost thirty years in office. At the other end of the spectrum, we have an example nearer home, which for obvious reason, I shall not name. In this case, successive governments' experiment with creating a welfare state had drained the country's financial resources and brought it to the brink of economic disaster. It has not produced a better society nor a better life for all. In fact, the reverse is true. In our tiny island without any resources, I leave it to your good sense to consider the consequences of launching any give-away schemes.

6 For improvements in social services must be seen in the light of careful allocation of scarce resources. There will always be a gap between the ideal and the achievable. The government will do what it can but it cannot provide everything for everyone. There will always be room for private effort, whether of an individual or group. This is particularly true in the case of the care of the less fortunate members of society.

7 One of the encouraging signs during the past few years has been the growth in the number of service clubs aiming in various ways at bettering their community. It is heartening to see more working people take time off from their busy lives and careers to plan and execute a charity project for the benefit of others. Yet I would like to see more projects of a continuing commitment rather than of a once-and-for-all effort. The latter has its value in generating public awareness of the existence of a need, and doubtless once this is done, there are others who would come forward to continue the good work.

8 On looking through the past activities of this Club, I note that the programme has been a full and varied one. I feel that your present project of raising funds for a refreshment kiosk to be run by the deaf deserves much support. When the project is completed it will enable some of our handicapped to prove that given the opportunity they can earn their living like normal people and take their place in society with pride and dignity as contributing members. This is the type of charity to be encouraged - helping others to help themselves. I hope that more clubs would consider ways of doing this and I wish your Club every success in meeting your objectives.