

## Lessons learned

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In 1961 I left this country to embark upon a career that would take me to many foreign countries in diverse parts of the world. At that time, different coloured skins of any hue were a rarity in this area as the influx of immigrants had barely reached the environs of Tayside. My recollection is that Chinese ethnics working in restaurants were the preponderant foreigners in Dundee. I personally did not encounter any others from foreign climes during my earlier formative years although there was a healthy mix of Caribbean workers in London where I trained for a short time before sailing out to the Far East.

How to interact with people of other skin colours and different religions were not questions that weighed heavily on my mind. More basic objectives such as job advancement etc., had to be tackled and conquered before contemplating these more important and weighty issues.

When originally approached by CFSR to write an article for this newsletter, I hesitated. Certainly, I had been fortunate enough to live in countries in the Far East, Middle East and the United States and as a consequence had done business and interacted on a social level with businessmen and women in many countries. However, I was unsure whether my perceptions and viewpoints would meld with the aspirations of CFSR.

So let's examine what I learned along the way and I leave it up to you – the reader – to decide whether there are any points worthy of consideration by CFSR.

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Singapore in 1961 was a melting pot of the majority Chinese and significant and important minorities of Malay, Indian/Sinhalese and European ethnics. There were other smaller groups that added to the flavour and spice of this beautiful city state that had a vibrancy that was almost palpable

As a junior bank executive I was immediately put in charge of a department where the majority of staff was Chinese with a minority of Malays and Indians. Looking back, I must confess that it was wonderful and so natural how everyone interacted regardless of race. Birthday parties, marriages and a myriad of other social events were all celebrated in great harmony. There was genuine respect and acceptance for each others beliefs and social mores. In a word, what was constantly on display was **Tolerance**

The racial equilibrium of Singapore was disturbed briefly a couple of years later when there were race riots between segments of the Chinese and Malay communities. My recollection is that the trouble stemmed from the thinking in certain segments of the minority Malay community that they were being denied a proper share in the expanding economic base of the island state. Undoubtedly, the Malays were not prospering at the same rate of increase as the Chinese majority. This is not the forum to delve into the reasons for this situation. However, I now subscribe to the case for an **Affirmative Action** policy – don't you just love how the Americans come up with all these phrases?- to help achieve a better sense of economic wellbeing within all major racial groups of a country to douse, if not entirely eradicate, the flames of economic jealousy.

*Let's fast forward to 1966.*

By then I had moved on to Malaysia and after spending around a year in the state of Kedah was transferred down to Kuala Lumpur the country's capital. KL, as it was affectionately known, was at that time a city resplendent in architectural edifices designed by the former colonialists. A sprinkling of junior skyscrapers were appearing but a time traveller from Pemas Towers 2006, going back some 40 years would be hard pressed to recognise Kuala Lumpur.

Although the ethnic majority in Malaysia were Malays, the Chinese were once again predominant in commerce and industry. There was a concerted effort by the government – the Malay based political party known as UMNO – to promote Malays through affirmative action and liberal loans to Malays with an entrepreneurial flair. This seemed to promote the interests of the host community well although I sensed there was not the same level of harmony as I had evidenced previously in Singapore. However, I must stress that is my

personal observation and perhaps other expatriates from that same era will have a different recollection.

Interracial relationships within the office environment seemed to work well and social gatherings were all positive experiences.

Earlier, I have admitted to now believing in a programme of affirmative action. Permit me to refine that belief slightly by stating that any such philosophy must be tempered by implementing a **Balanced and Measured** programme.

*Join me now on my flying carpet to India in 1969.*

Bombay (Mumbai) was a seething mass of humanity living in a sprawling city. The unfortunates of the time could be found living in abject poverty and squalid dank surroundings where putrid smells abounded. Free enterprise occupied a small part of the overall Indian economy at that time and expansion of the private sector was in its infancy.

My staff was 100% Indian although within that culture were Hindus, Sikhs, Moslems, Zoroastrians and Christians. This was a tinder box of different political and religious beliefs. There was also the added dimension of the Indian caste system to contend with.

However, I never once saw any show of overt chauvinism by anyone from this diverse group within the office environment. Oh, I almost forgot, that is apart from the time all my staff surrounded my desk and gave me a verbal tongue lashing during a union protest. No big deal really, they apologised after the haranguing for any inconvenience caused!

From early on in my stay in India, I had made the conscientious decision to learn the Hindi language and studied very hard to graduate. Once fluent in the language, I made a point of using it wherever practical. The difference in how I was received by Indian nationals once they learned I had made the effort to learn their language and was prepared to use it was stark.

This taught me the inestimable worth of making the effort to understand the culture of the host country. The 1<sup>st</sup> and most important step in that direction must surely be learning the language. In summary, **Assimilate and Integrate**

*By 1975, we had moved to California and started a new life in the land of the free.*

No longer was I working in the international banking game. I had made the decision to pursue a career in international business and ended up working for an international trading and export company focusing on business with Middle East countries.

America opened my eyes to the hard cut and thrust of business. "Take no prisoners", is a phrase that springs to mind.

Although the United States welcomed immigrants from all over the world, there was and continues to be a preference policy regarding the origins of immigrants. The white / black issue continues to plague the United States and every once and a while there are eruptions caused by an isolated blatantly hostile racial act. However that is a matter better left for discussion to greater minds than mine.

My experiences with local businessmen and their families in many Middle East countries are perhaps more relevant. We were suppliers to many very large construction companies involved in the building phase of government expansion programmes. Most negotiations and completion of transactions were handled in the same unremarkable way as would occur in this country or indeed any other country. The Arabs are extremely shrewd business people and we had to work very hard to make it all worth while. Also, they are very generous and hospitable hosts and I can honestly say every social occasion was wonderful.

In 1982, an incident occurred that continues to be etched vividly in my mind and is very pertinent to this article.

We were supplying all components for an integrated ceiling installation in a major project in the State of Kuwait. Problems surfaced with the product manufacturer/supplier in regard

to various technical issues and things escalated rapidly to a point where costly lawyer fees seemed the next step towards a resolution. The Big Chill had set in between us

It was agreed that a last stab at resolution would take place in a San Francisco hotel and a conference room was hired for the occasion. There were 4 people at the meeting - a Scotsman and an Arab American – from our side and a Jewish American and a Mexican American from the suppliers' side. The four of us had many previous meetings and conversations and there never had been any invective or rancour.

Unfortunately, this meeting did not maintain a business like atmosphere and it quickly descended into verbal mayhem with castigations being made against all things Jewish and Arab. It seemed like a replay of all previous wars between these two peoples and the arguments dipped back into wars shrouded by the mists of time to those of us from a non Semitic background.

The noise levels in the conference room rose and eventually the two protagonists were squaring up to each other. Imagine, two senior business executives from multi million corporations quite prepared to duke it out. Eventually we two bystanders separated the two individuals and quietened things down to the extent we all exited the room. Eventually, the dispute was resolved through the legal process.

Reading today's papers it is evident that the resolution of the Middle East situation is no further forward than it was all these years ago. Undoubtedly it is intractable – let's just all pray that it is resolved sooner rather than later.

What lesson can be drawn from this incident? Perhaps that it is paramount at all times to recognise the importance of Historical events and how they impact on present day matters. Also, we must all accept the overwhelming strength and pivotal part played by religion in certain cultures. **Respect for religion and historical events** sums it up pretty well.

*In 1992 I returned to the United Kingdom by courtesy of British Airlines.*

Since my return, there are no personal experiences that can add to the subject of interracial harmony. However, the rise of the far right in this country does give me cause for concern. I suggest that the apparent unwillingness of certain segments of the immigrant population to assimilate and integrate may have been influential in persuading British nationals to give support to the BNP. Equally worrying is the growing number of Brits who exhibit **Ignorance and Non Acceptance** in their treatment of non whites.

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Thank you for coming along with me on this short journey. What have I learned over all these years and is there anything for CFSR to take on board.

I have emphasised a few words that provide me with positive values. These are:

***Tolerance, Balanced and Measured Affirmative Action, Assimilate and Integrate, Respect for religion and historical events.***

The only negative thought revolves around individuals who display **Ignorance and Non Acceptance** on racial matters.

Currently, the state of relations between the many cultures and religions seems very fragile indeed. I would suggest that through the practice of the positive values listed above, the negative thought will eventually be minimised or hopefully eradicated. Both individually and collectively, we have the moral obligation to contribute positively in any way – no matter how small – by practicing these positive elements in our daily lives.

CFSR can be a force for good in the long march towards interracial harmony and undoubtedly already have the outlined positive thoughts in their agenda.