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# A case of colonial yips



**Second  
Sight**

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**TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL:** Good language skills help youngsters to communicate with each other and to adequately express themselves – APpic

SQUINTING carefully into the sky this week, I could have sworn I saw a passing cloud looking vaguely like a Caucasian face and sporting a giant handlebar moustache. It certainly looked like one of the old *Mat Salleh Tuans*.

I looked down and felt that, Dr Who-like, I had stepped through a time machine. There was Queen Elizabeth II, walking through flag-bearing representatives of 53 nations that once held her subjects – that is, us. Here was Westminster Abbey... here the organ music and Christian priests; the solemn intonations.

But wait. Here too were representatives from the British Muslim community, from the Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Baha'i, and of the Chief Rabbi. And none of them were wailing "Hail great Empress" in the manner of Victorian durbars. In fact, not an elephant, white or otherwise, was on parade.

Here were young people talking about how they had triumphed over physical disability to achieve sporting heights, how as teenagers they had worked in the slums of Manila, working to help the poor or working towards equality for women. A jazz saxophonist with a right-on hair top knot played a soulful melody.

All were acknowledging in a multi-faith Observance that an accident of admittedly wretched, British colonial history had brought what are now 1.8 billion people together in a

global family that often doesn't even know it's a family; though like a family, its constituent parts bitch, fight and scratch each other; and sulk, rage and affect indifference.

Occasionally, they come together, like on Monday, March 9, Commonwealth Day.

I own up to being a paid-up member of the admirers of the Commonwealth, having left journalism to work in its headquarters in London for 12 years. The exuberance of learning about others, their lives, their problems, that at once seemed so familiar yet unfamiliar, has never left me. I say familiar because the British had a template for colonial administration, health, education and, to a certain extent, governance. They cheerfully applied it everywhere, whether it was suitable or not.

The modern Commonwealth's great work has been standing reproof of its colonial past: fighting against racism, helping defeat apartheid in South Africa, taking on Western governments and pharmaceutical companies in the early days

of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, identifying from the 1970s the dangers of climate change and sea level rises, at the cutting edge of thinking about equality of women. Malaysia's role has been long and honourable. In recent years, for example, former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Musa Hitam has been the quiet adviser, cajoler and mentor in the Maldives' march to multiparty democracy. His mission was at the behest of the Commonwealth.

And yes, it has its weaknesses: not being able to "do" anything about conflict and problems in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Kashmir or Zimbabwe – though no other organisation can 'do' anything either.

But utter the word "Commonwealth" and out come phrases like "rump of Empire". The brain switches into an automatic and incapacitating tremor.

I call it the colonial yips.

The yips are present too in the ongoing issue of teaching science and mathematics in Malaysian schools. Tremors here have set off every knee

jerk reaction possible.

I leave aside the technical issue of Bahasa Malaysia, English, science and mathematics because there are experts who no doubt can deal with that; or even the wisdom of assuming language skills can be taught through technical subjects.

Why is there a frisson of fright when the words "English" and "education" are put together? In China, 250 million people are learning English. In former French colonies, French is so widespread that even the illegal boat people sneaking into Europe speak it. Even Parisiens speak more English now.

What seems important to me is

that first and foremost Malaysian youngsters must have good language skills to communicate with each other and to adequately express themselves. Second, they must have skills in an international language to access the literature and knowledge of the world. Third, science, mathematics and technical subjects must be taught to a high standard – whatever the language of instruction.

Other countries have grasped this. Hybrid solutions will not suffice.

Language is supposed to bring us together, not divide us.

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