



Towards the 21st Century

by
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IN THIS WEEK'S HRI-POST CO-OPERATION COLUMN, Dr. Chira looks at how the new government is shaping up amid changing patterns of social mobility. He also relays the fruits of a fascinatingly futuristic conversation with Dr. Kazuo Takahashi, program director of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation.

Thai society is currently characterised by conflicting moods. On the one hand, there is a lingering sadness at the passing away of Her Royal Highness the Princess Mother, and on the other hand there is a positive sense of gratitude surrounding her many achievements. Indeed the more we learn of her achievements and dedication to good works, the more we see how much our society owes to Somdej Ya.

I would like to say again that I hope that this period of mourning will prompt the Thai people to renewed efforts to unite and work together for the benefit of the majority.

Another mood that is prevalent in Thai society at this time, is the uncertainty surrounding our new government. With only less than a month in power, the Thai people have already had a chance to learn a lot about the Banharn administration. I was speaking to someone the other day who told me he thought that it was a good thing that Khun Banharn should have a go at leading the government, as it would give us a chance to compare his achievements with those of previous governments. In business terminology this is known as 'benchmarking'. Therefore we can say that Khun Banharn's government provides a useful measurement for historical and future political benchmarking.

Our society is one of diversity. We have survived for so long, and yet to Western scholars the reasons for this are not clear. Among other reasons, I think that we have survived because we have allowed social mobility, and also because we have ways of blending traditional beliefs, values and institutions with constantly changing new developments.

In terms of social mobility, it is very clear that both the present prime minister and his predecessor, Khun Chuan, both personify this concept very well. Both men came from the provinces and worked their way up through different paths to the top. Nevertheless, their personalities and philosophies are entirely different, and if you then compare them with Khun Anand Panyarachun, you see how there is an increasing tendency towards interplay between the different cross sections of Thai society.

So much for what is going on at a national level. Now, let me report on our activities at the Human Resources Institute. Last week, it was a great honour for me to welcome my good friend Dr. Kazuo Takahashi, the program director of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. During our dinner party we exchanged ideas on many interesting topics of relevance to Thailand.

Dr. Takahashi raised the point that Mr. Lester Brown, the famous futuristic expert on agriculture, has predicted that supply shortages of agricultural products will occur in the future. Lester Brown runs a famous 'think tank' based in Washington D.C. called the Worldwatch Institute. Dr. Takahashi told me that our current stocks of food are only sufficient to feed us for 60 days, compared to 100 days which is what it should be for safety. This was a very interesting point, not least because Thailand could reap some benefits from rising grain prices in export markets. On the other hand, higher food prices would also add more fire to our inflation problem, which is a major concern of the Banharn administration.

According to Dr. Takahashi, there are a number of factors contributing to this precarious state of affairs. The first major factor is that there is a global shortage of water. according to Lester Brown, there are now as many as 90 countries experiencing water shortages because the rate of utilization of water has increased so fast. The second consideration is that we have reached the limits of our technological advances in agriculture. In addition, an important shift is taking place in the consumption patters of the Chinese people, who with their rising income levels are now demanding a better quality food supply.

We also discussed the future of Japan, and Dr. Takahashi was rather gloomy about his country's economic outlook and its prospects for taking on a dominant role in global affairs. He said that he felt that lack of social mobility and diversity were the two main obstacles to renewing the former dynamism in Japanese society.

Finally, we got onto the subject of the future world role of China. Dr. Takashi's foundation is launching a project to study what the future China might look like.

As I have said many times before, now that the cold war is over, in the next 20 years Thailand must work out how to position itself intelligently in the new world order. According to a World Bank estimate, in 2020 the Thai economy will be the 7th largest in the world and the largest of all will be China. Dr. Takahashi and I had a good laugh that when that happens meetings of the G7 economies - Japan, the U.S.A., France, Italy, the U.K., Canada and Germany - will no longer be relevant!

I would like to end by inviting all the readers of this column to think ahead, and perhaps, if our political leaders have long term vision, then the issues which we foresee can be discussed now and remedied.

See you next week!



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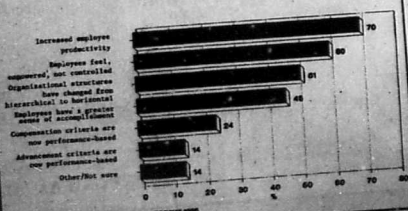
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