

## The rich legacy of Singapore's first nationalist

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DAVID MARSHALL grew up in colonial Singapore. He was treated by the British as an Asian and therefore a second-class human being. Until he was 16, he resented the social and political order but assumed that it was the natural state of the world.

He contracted tuberculosis at that age and spent three years recuperating in a sanatorium in Switzerland. The tragedy had a silver lining. David learnt French and German. He devoured French literature and fell in love with French civilisation. He was inspired by the French ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. He met Europeans on equal terms and was determined, on his return, to fight against British colonialism and racism.

In 1927, when he was 19, Marshall was provoked by a speech made by an MP in the British Parliament, describing Singapore as 'a pestilential and immoral cesspool'. David gave a speech at the YMCA on the topic, 'Who Is Responsible For This Cesspool?' The Director of Education, who obviously did not believe in freedom of speech, banned him from speaking in any of Singapore's schools and educational institutions.

Marshall's tenure as chief minister was brief but his impact was enormous.

First, he can be rightly called Singapore's first nationalist. He was a proud Singaporean. When asked why he did not flee Singapore with the rest of his family during the Second World War, he replied: 'This is my country and it is my duty to stay and fight.' He stayed and was made a prisoner of war by Japan.

Second, he was a fearless anti-colonial fighter. He stood up to the British and demanded to be treated with respect and as an equal. By his example, he empowered the people and emboldened them to demand an end to colonial rule and to systematic racism.

Third, he enfranchised hundreds of thousands of Chinese by giving them citizenship and the right to vote.

Fourth, he introduced several policies and institutions which have endured and become part of our iconography: Among them, the policies of multilingualism and multiracialism; treating all religions equally; the Central Provident Fund; and the practice of our MPs meeting their constituents once a week.

Fifth, he helped Singapore pass an important litmus test in 1955. I often hear the question asked: 'Is Singapore ready for a non-Chinese Prime Minister?'

If Singapore was ready, in 1955, to accept a Jew as our chief minister, I have no reason to believe that, 53 years later, Singapore has retrogressed so much that we are not ready to accept a non-Chinese as our prime minister. I would like to believe that, in Singapore, it is merit, not ethnicity, which is the decisive factor.

When the NUS Law School began in 1957, its dean succeeded in persuading some of our best legal practitioners to teach us on a part-time basis. This remarkable group included David Marshall, Eddie Barker, Punch Coomaraswamy, Harry Wee and many others.

Marshall taught us criminal law and criminal procedure. He also taught us the art of advocacy through moot courts. He was a gifted teacher and brought both learning and enthusiasm to his classes.

When I graduated in 1961, I served my pupillage with Marshall. Unlike some other masters, he took his duty to mentor his pupil very seriously. He made me sit inside his enormous office so that I could observe him in action. He was a prodigious worker and taught me to emulate his work ethic.

The 12 months I spent with him taught me so many things about the practice of law, about the art of advocacy, about the importance of thorough preparation, about legal ethics, and about life. I could not have asked for a better master.

Marshall was larger than life - tall, good looking, with expressive eyes and a Shakespearean voice. He exuded an aura which made him the centre of attraction. He had a warm and kind heart - and he was generous to a fault.

When he was ambassador in Paris, he welcomed all visiting Singaporeans to his residence. On one occasion, a Singapore choir came to the residence to sing. Without consulting his wife Jean first, David invited them to stay for dinner. As there was not enough food in the kitchen, I was despatched to buy loaves of baguettes. My wife helped Jean in the kitchen to fry omelettes and other goodies!

I will always remember David Marshall. He was truly an unforgettable person.

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