

A tribute to father's old friend Fong Swee Suan

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My father, Mr Devan Nair, and Mr Fong Swee Suan were close friends. Jailed together for three years from 1956 to 1959, my father was Mr Fong's "Indian brother", and Mr Fong, my father's "Chinese brother".

Many years later, Mr Fong recalled that he taught my father Chinese in prison, with little success; and my father taught him English, with a little more success.

As fortune would have it, when the People's Action Party (PAP) split in 1961, the two friends found themselves leading rival trades union federations - Mr Fong, the Singapore Association of Trade Unions, which was affiliated to the Barisan Sosialis; and Mr Nair, the National Trades Union Congress, which was affiliated to the PAP.

The parting of ways was painful for both men. But they never doubted each other's sincerity. They both knew the other was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for his beliefs.

One memory from my childhood that I have never forgotten was the simple dinner my parents gave Mr and Mrs Fong when they married. The event took place in our home a few months before the split, when the writing was already on the wall. Despite the bitter political battle that was looming, the two men retained great warmth for each other.

Many years later, in the mid-1980s, when Mr Fong became ill, my father arranged for him to return to Singapore for treatment.

Mr Fong was then living in Johor, and was prohibited from entering Singapore. The Singapore Government gave Mr Fong permission to return, and my father insisted Mr Fong stay with him in his home.

My father is no longer here to pay tribute to his old friend. But I know what would have been in his heart.

When Mr Lim Chin Siong, Mr Fong's close comrade, died in 1996, Mr Nair quoted these lines from T.S. Eliot's *Little Gidding* in his tribute to Mr Lim. The same lines express what would have been in my father's heart about his old friend, Mr Fong Swee Suan:

We cannot revive old factions
We cannot restore old policies
Or follow an antique drum.
These men, and those who
opposed them
And those whom they opposed
Accept the constitution of
silence
And are folded in a single party.
Whatever we inherit from the

fortunate

We have taken from the defeated

What they had to leave us - a symbol:

A symbol perfected in death.

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