

# Our Cunning Plans

By Sahlan Diver

The British television comedy show, 'Blackadder', spawned a popular catch-phrase: 'I have a cunning plan.' In the show the phrase is usually spoken by Baldrick, the idiotic servant, as a prelude to some crazy, convoluted and essentially stupid idea for getting his master, Blackadder, out of a predicament. Some years ago another TV program, a quiz show entitled 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?', featured a real-life 'cunning plan' when one of the contestants, an ex-army major, arranged for an accomplice in the audience to communicate to him the answers to the questions through a coded sequence of coughs. Needless to say, the coughing scandal became the butt of much humour and derision in the popular press, but something about it has always puzzled me: if you have a syndicate of two people, one an idiot, the other a know-all, why go to all the trouble of installing the idiot as a competitor and dreaming up an elaborate Morse code coughing scheme so as to be able to cheat? Why not just install the know-all instead, and dispense with the idiot?

We can laugh at Blackadder and the coughing cheats because of the outlandishness of their plans. It is possible, however, to allow our own lives to be run according to plans that are less than sound, but without noticing, because although these plans are fundamentally flawed, they are not obviously so. This is dangerous. Even more dangerous when the plans originate not from ourselves but from an authority figure in whom we have long placed implicit trust.

It seems to me that the big Subud enterprises were carried out according to one such flawed plan. The people running those enterprises weren't idiots, but as they were drawn from the very small Subud population it was inevitable that they would be less experienced and capable than directors we could have chosen from the population at large. The accomplices in this cunning plan were the membership, who supplied in this case not backup expertise, but an ever increasing flow of backup money to replace that wasted by the mistakes of the inexperienced and insufficiently qualified. And the prime driver of this flawed plan was Bapak with the emphasis in his talks on the importance of these enterprises and an implication that the overriding determinant of our investment should be our commitment to the progress of Subud.

Big enterprise was not our only cunning plan. We had a second. The other day I came across this statement of Bapak's in a 1971 edition of the helpers' handbook: 'To spread Subud by propaganda simply because we live in an age of propaganda is not the way. Propaganda is today used everywhere....'

Let's examine these statements: 'We live in an age of propaganda.... Propaganda is today used everywhere.' Says who? Says Bapak. This statement is uncomfortably like propaganda itself. His blanket dismissal of an aspect of society is unsettling, and even more so is the unquestioning acceptance by compliant followers. Bapak's dismissive statements about advertising have been so much taken to heart by members that the suggestion to advertise Subud is still very much taboo or worrying for them.

If you were a clarinet teacher who wanted to get more pupils, would you advertise in the press, maybe put on a demo concert or two, make a promotional video to put on your web site; or would you instead wait decades in the hope that you would produce pupils who played the clarinet so spectacularly that people not only stopped in their tracks to listen to them, but also decided then and there that they wanted to learn to

play the clarinet themselves, were willing to dedicate hours each week to the necessary practise, and on top of all that were willing to attribute the spectacular clarinet playing as all due to your teaching methods rather than to any innate talent in the pupils themselves? We would think it the height of conceit if we met one of those pupils in the street and on asking him how he was getting on with his lessons were told that one day we would hear him play so wonderfully that we would automatically want to learn to play the clarinet as well. We would be much more likely to take up the instrument if he said, 'I'm really enjoying it. I feel I'm making continual progress although there is obviously a very long way to go. Why don't you give it a try? You might be pleasantly surprised, and if you find it's not for you, you can always give it up.'

So I am saying that this second cunning plan of Bapak, to spread Subud by example, is a flawed plan, just as unworkable as the big enterprise plan. Much better to actively advertise in the press to encourage new people to join. Incidentally, advertising, if successful in attracting new people, would oblige Subud to be more accountable for its flaws. With only a small trickle of applicants and a similar small flow of members leaving, it's easy to excuse the situation by saying that disenchanted people are either unready or unsuitable. A large influx of people coming to Subud with fresher and more varied perspectives would force us to confront and exorcise the demons we like to pretend don't exist in Subud.

There's more. The third cunning plan promoted by Bapak is the idea that we can have super-productive discussion by avoiding contention: the famous concept of 'harmony'. Perhaps in Bapak's own country, Indonesia, this works. I cannot say, I have never been to Indonesia. But Subud is a world-wide movement and its leader should, as far as possible, make recommendations that are workable in all its countries. Most members see Subud as being a 'spiritual' movement, and by definition are therefore aspiring to be 'spiritual' themselves, so Bapak's emphasis on 'harmony' discourages people from getting heated in discussion. They prefer to pull back from an issue, leaving potentially valid and useful criticisms unspoken, for fear of causing offence. The effect is that agreement is mainly superficial and nominal. Decisions are often ineffective or ill-advised by reason of not being comprehensively thought through. And because members lack practise in conducting a critical examination of policy, when an issue does arise on which they can no longer contain themselves, they tend to resort to anger and character assassination instead.

A key component of Bapak's cunning plan for decision-making is that by feeling the latihan together we can arrive at the truth. This idea has a most unfortunate aggravating effect in this Internet era of email, facebook and newsgroups. Huge expenditure of money and time is still being wasted on face to face national and international meetings in the mistaken belief that these will produce, through 'receiving', results superior to the necessarily more detailed teasing out of the issues that could occur through discussion on the Internet. I heard of one such national discussion the other day, experienced long term members descending to the level of an unpleasant slanging match. Seems like there wasn't much receiving going on, apart from the receiving of insults. If these people had taken the trouble to enter into a detailed email conversation in advance, instead of having to cram the feelings of twenty people into a two hour meeting after more than a hundred miles of car travel, my bet is on them achieving a much greater respect for each other's viewpoints and maybe even a productive and positive outcome.

I am not criticising the essence of Bapak's ideas. Indeed, If you want to know where I personally stand on Bapak, my guess is that I am one of the very few members remaining who believe that Bapak was right when he recommended Subud's primary

focus to be enterprise. In contrast to myself, there are probably plenty of 'Bapak stalwarts' out there who will be offended by even the slightest criticism of Bapak. But I wonder how many of them maintain a convenient silence when it comes to their rejection of all Bapak's enterprise advice? If you want to say that Bapak was divinely inspired, and therefore flawless, then you need to be vocal about the whole package, not just the bits that you happen to agree with or that make you appear 'spiritual' in the presence of your peers — you can't do pick-and-mix Bapak.

As a man Bapak may have had few character faults compared to the rest of us, but as a human being living in the world, he could not help but be limited by his culture, his time, his education, his work experience, the capacity for intelligence he was born with, by his own specific talents, and by the limitations of the people he gathered round him as advisers. It would not be surprising if he made bad judgements. What should be surprising is the desire of his followers to take all his statements as being God-sent. Consider this: if Bapak's suggestions were so God-like why did he not foresee both the environmental issues in the decades following his death and the huge commercial demand for hardwood? Might he not have better advised us to invest all those gold mining millions into developing commercially managed sustainable forestry in Kalimantan instead? We could have started it back then, started making money immediately, but done it in a way that would have become a shining example of an alternative to slash-and-burn and dispossession of native peoples. Of course, it's easy to talk with the benefit of hindsight, but we treat Bapak as if he had 100% foresight, which clearly he didn't. On the contrary, in Kalimantan he almost boasted of the size of the trees we could cut down to make clearings for crop plantation. In this he was no different from other men of his time.

One of the editors reading an early draft of this article, was concerned that it would upset people by being taken as a direct attack on Bapak. The editor suggested, 'All these issues could be confronted through pointing out how and why they haven't worked in the past and how we might do things differently now, without bringing Bapak into it at all — ignoring him, rather than opposing him.' Unfortunately this won't do. Our prime approach to enterprises, our ideas on the promotion of Subud, the continued misunderstanding on how to achieve harmony, the focus of energy in Kalimantan on gold-mining — all these things are directly attributable to Bapak. They did not come from us; they came about because most of us put blind faith in Bapak's advice. As Ragnar Lystad suggests in another Subud Vision article (<http://www.subudvision.org/rl/A%20Necessary%20Reappraisal.htm>) it is about time that we reappraised the contribution of Bapak, in order to free Subud from those of his judgements that are no longer appropriate or advisable. Until we are ready to confront the fact that Bapak got some things wrong, we will just go on foolishly, slavishly.

So, Subud, it's time to make a choice. Are we going to wake up to the fact that our plans are not nearly so cunning and well-laid as we once thought they were? And if so, what are we going to do about it?