

## A FRESH START ON THE FILIPINO DREAM

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*Fourth Jaime V. Ongpin Annual Memorial Lecture  
On Public Service in Business and Government  
Ateneo de Manila University, October 12, 2005*

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I have been asked to speak specifically on “Leadership in Public Service”—a subject that, many of us will agree, is today’s most important imperative. To verbalize the question that has occupied the minds of most Filipinos these past four months on countless TV talk shows, in columns, editorials, and other commentaries: “Who and where is the leader who will deliver us out of this quagmire, this continuing crisis, into our Promised Land?”

It will not be the first time that we have asked this question. Our propagandists and revolutionaries asked it in the 1890s. We have asked it in every presidential election since 1946. In 1972, in 1986, and again in 2001, we thought we had the answer—or at least some people did.

To put it bluntly, we were wrong. Everyone was wrong. Some Filipinos, answering the call of their time, gave it their best shot and did what they could—only to realize that it takes more than one man or one woman not just to move a country, but also to move it forward.

### **The Filipino Dream**

Today, the Filipino Dream seems farther than ever from realization. That Filipino Dream is a simple one, and it revolves around the Filipino family and its well-being, not around material goods. We want to be able to provide for the needs of every member of our family; and to leave something behind for our children and grandchildren to build on. That means a good education, a good job, a roof over our heads, and peace and security in our homes and neighborhoods. We want to start our children off at a level better than what we ourselves began with.

It’s not a lot to ask for. Time and again, our people have proven their willingness to make tremendous sacrifices to achieve that dream—working abroad for many lonely years, even under the most difficult conditions.

But today—nearly 60 years after Independence, nearly 20 years after EDSA 1, and five years after EDSA 2—that dream remains even more remote, a cruelly elusive phantom for many Filipinos. Our people feel dispirited, their labors and sacrifices subverted by endemic corruption, political squabbling, crime and violence, and by the absence of a clear, believable vision of the Filipino future and of the way to get there.

Perhaps we have been asking the wrong question. Perhaps we should revisit our notions of leadership, stop scanning the horizon for a knight on a white horse or a redeemer bearing a cross to save us, and reject that leadership is found outside of us.

The leader and leadership are ~~is~~ within us. Leadership is all about taking personal responsibility for what happens and until we step up to this, the leader or leadership that we await will elude us or, at best, be a matter of luck.

### Ordinary men

This idea occurred to me as I pondered the topic of this lecture and as I remembered the examples of several people I knew from my own life to be, unquestionably, leaders.

In my previous life as an investment banker, I had the opportunity to meet some remarkable men.

One of them, John Hendricks, was the visionary founder of The Discovery Channel. He had this idea that all of these products that were made by art students and film students all across the United States could be gathered and presented to the public. It was a venture start-up and I, as an investment banker, had the opportunity of being there to fund his project. And now, we have and enjoy the Discovery Channel, not just as a business venture, but also as a mold of how we look upon ourselves and the world we live in.

Tony Tan Caktiong, the man behind the phenomenal success of Jollibee, is another such man. He began with an ice cream scooping station in Cubao and now, 500 stores later, 20,000 employees later, annually sales of ~~₱20-B~~ ~~of sales~~ later, but more importantly, ~~₱16-B~~ of domestic purchasing in the supply chain later, he has built up an enterprise that provides jobs, incomes and opportunities for countless of our people.

I thought, too, of the man whose memory we are honoring today—Jimmy Ongpin, who was both a friend and mentor to me. We shared similar backgrounds—we both went to business school in the United States, and became investment bankers on Wall Street. Jimmy, of course, went on to head Benguet Corporation, a New York Stock Exchange listed company and one of the largest industrial concerns in our country. If I recall correctly, he was the first Filipino to do so.

Occasionally our paths crossed, and we had many fruitful conversations. And I came to learn that at times, the secretaries would refer to me as Jimmy 2. Whether it was t-w-o or t-o-o, I was and am flattered by the reference.

And if you will allow an admiring son, there was, of course, my father. Before Martial Law, he was at the apex of his career. He was senator, leader of the opposition and widely expected to succeed the then incumbent. And then Martial Law came about. He was jobless. The

office that he actually went to was padlocked. He lost all pelf, power and position. Friends deserted him. Phone calls went unreturned.

And so he spent many years in the wilderness, alone. But, he made himself useful and productive by continuing his advocacies. All throughout those years until he died, he never gave in. He remained steadfast to his ideals. This notwithstanding the many blandishments made by the then regime.

These led then to the differentiation ~~as~~ between the title and the person. In my case, “senator” is what I do, it’s not who I am.

All these men had something in common: they had a vision, they had focus, ~~and~~ above all, they worked extraordinarily hard to achieve their goals. But they were otherwise ordinary men aspiring only to put in an honest day’s work, from one day to the next, making judgments and decisions by their best lights, as their education and their values told them.

This is the kind of leadership we need today, the leadership that resides in all of us. It is the leadership that emanates from personal integrity and personal initiative, translated into actions, choices, ~~and~~ programs that benefit the community and eventually the nation.

For far too long, we Filipinos have cast our leaders in a certain mold—that of the charismatic savior, the one person chosen by destiny and character to assume the burdens of the nation. Perhaps because of our Catholic faith, we prefer our leaders to be self-sacrificing martyrs—“Christ-like victims,” in the words of Jose Rizal’s biographer Leon Ma. Guerrero — figures who redeemed the nation only through their heroic deaths: Rizal himself, Andres Bonifacio, Ninoy Aquino, to name the most obvious.

I have no quarrel with the heroic qualities of these Filipinos, all of whom I deeply admire. I will even dare say that we seem to be sorely bereft of such figures today—individuals whose towering vision, bravery, integrity, ~~and~~ patriotism can galvanize and inspire our countrymen to equally great deeds.

But as ardently as we may hope for another one of them to emerge, I think it better that, ~~we~~ we actually change the paradigm; ~~them~~ that we take personal responsibility and act ourselves on whatever it is we ~~should~~ deem proper.

### **Our general malaise**

That our people have resigned the prerogatives and responsibilities of leadership to a fated few, ~~whoever they may be~~—is merely a reflection of the general despondency—the economic, political, cultural, and spiritual malaise—that has overtaken us.

While we have managed to get by, getting by simply won't be enough. There's nothing in this hand-to-mouth dynamic to suggest that next year will be better, let alone that the next generation will be better off than we are now.

What we have is maintenance with guaranteed deterioration. We are on a treadmill, doing a lot of huffing and puffing but not getting anywhere. If we just did exactly the same thing a year from now, and year to year, we will still be worse off thereafter, if only because of the inflation and developments across the globe.

Today our people are physically, psychologically, and spiritually emaciated. And this emaciation prevents them from being excited by or engaged in an effort to break out of their downward spiral.

In 1986 and again in 2001, there was still sufficient vigor in the body politic, in the idea that we could still do something about our future. Today, not even five years after EDSA 2, the depletion in our psychological capital has been such that the imperative of making a daily living has trumped all other expenditures of time, energy and effort.

I trace this depletion to what might be called the "disconnect" between effort and output. Our social compact is premised on the basic idea is that if people put something into their life, they should get something reasonably gainful out of it. We all "bought" into this bargain and we look to the government as the chief implementer of the same. This is a simple but basic bargain that seems to work in meritocracies like the US and Singapore, but here in the Philippines, the gap between effort and output has steadily widened.

One of the most remarkable things I recall about my time in the US was how my friends and I could get together and plan our lives—a job, a down payment on a home, a 30-year-mortgage, and at the end of our labors, we were going to own all of these and have a stake. There was a very clear connection between what you invested in your future and what you could expect from it.

But here, instead of rewarding creativity, initiative, and outstanding performance, our system has come to value conformity and mediocrity.

Instead of the merit system and all that we associate with it—education, competence, industry, and observance of the law—a blessed few have gotten ahead on the wings of *palakasan* and *pakikisama*, the twin blights of our political culture.

I remember how—when I was a much younger man—politics was imbued with fervor, with a certain grandeur of vision and spirit. Back then, parties were much better defined, and election results were awaited with bated breath, because they could actually mean a real difference in the drift and the manner of governance. Today—and this no great or original discovery of mine—politics has become an arena for brute power and naked opportunism, and operates as the doorway to a roomful of spoils.

It is all too easy to conclude that the system has failed us. Indeed, as we have recently been reminded, our political system may be like an infected pool that taints all those who step into it. But I don't subscribe to the notion that the failures and weaknesses of our system have produced—or can absolve—the failures and weaknesses of our leadership.

### **Personal responsibility and moral leadership**

In a sense, true leadership must exist before, above, and beyond the system, so that when it immerses itself into the system, it exerts a cleansing, rejuvenative power, rather than be merely, supinely corrupted by it.

Blaming the system evades personal responsibility. In government, as in business, we bring into our jobs the values that have shaped and prepared us to make decisions for the good of others. Those values and decisions do not necessarily involve multimillion-dollar deals or millions of votes. Every day—not just once but many times—every individual gets an opportunity to exercise leadership, in decisions big and small.

Every day for me is a struggle in exercising leadership. I am constantly asking myself: will what I say or what I do move the country forward, or will I just be indulging myself? Are the people getting value not for their money but for their vote?

Jimmy Ongpin surely faced the same dilemmas in his own sphere. He could have chosen to skirt environmental regulations as chief of Benguet Corporation—but he did not. He felt personally accountable for his corporate decisions. He could have ducked when he saw that government policy was ruinous to the economy and the country—but he did not. He challenged the existing order (including his brother's ideas and programs) and became a central player in overthrowing the dictatorship. When the call came for him to serve the Aquino government, he brought with him those same values, and applied them with the same vigor and consistency. He did not become a leader because he became Secretary of Finance; he became the Secretary of Finance, and head of the economic team, because he had already proven himself a leader.

Moral leadership—or doing the right thing for the good of the many—is not a function of the system, but of the individual. If everyone picked up one piece of litter, or stayed in the proper traffic lane, or paid the right taxes, or declined a bribe, or put up shelter for the homeless, it would not matter one whit whether we had a presidential, a parliamentary, a monarchical, or a tribal system. What would matter would be that we did the right thing.

If the failure of the system cannot excuse our leaders, then the failure of our leaders cannot excuse us. If we expect much of our leaders, then we must expect as much of ourselves.

Indeed it is only we, the citizens, who can make the system—any system—work. Our destiny is in our hands—hands that work and hands that build, not hands that destroy.

## Nothing like hard work

The experience of our neighbors tells us that nothing succeeds better than old-fashioned hard work and determination—in an environment that spurs, nurtures, and focuses this national effort.

A few years ago, I was awarded the Lee Kuan Yew fellowship by the Singapore Government, and I had the privilege of having lunch with the man himself. At that encounter, the father of modern day Singapore reminded me that while the world often sees his country's success as a "miracle," there was nothing miraculous about leaving the Federation of Malaysia (in fact, they were kicked out in 1965 with practically nothing) and forging ahead to become Southeast Asia's most spectacular success story. For forty years, Singaporeans put their noses to the grindstone—until, today, they can proudly claim to be better off than their former colonial master. They are now ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in the world index of prosperity, well ahead of their colonial master Great Britain who came in at number 20.

Another prominent Asian thinker, Timothy Ong, has made a point of citing some sobering figures to chronicle the stunning reversals of fortune that have taken place in our part of the world just over the last century.

"In 1954," Timothy Ong noted, "the World Bank, after exhaustive analysis, declared South Korea and Taiwan as economic basket cases without any hope. In 1993, the same World Bank declared South Korea and Taiwan to be economic superpowers."

"In 1960, South Korea and Ghana were roughly at par in economic terms. Both were former colonies, both had agrarian societies, and both had per capita income of roughly US\$240 per person. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century only 40 years later, Korea is part of the developed world while Ghana remains mired in poverty."

Burma at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had the most prosperous and improved economy in Southeast Asia. It was certainly considerably more prosperous than Thailand. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, income per capita in Thailand, notwithstanding the financial crisis in 1997, was five times that of Burma.

And this last example is one we are all too familiar with: "In 1952, the Philippines had a per capita income twice that of Thailand. By 1999, a generation later, Thailand had a per capita income twice that of the Philippines."

This compare–contrast exercise leads to two conclusions:

First, that the progress of societies and nations is not preordained. Societies and nations progress, but they can also stagnate, fall behind, and get left behind.

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Second, that societies and nations, for better or for worse, indeed for richer or for poorer, shape their respective destinies.

Yes, of course, it made a difference that a country like Singapore was led by an extremely dedicated, strong-willed, honest, and visionary man. But behind every such leader is an army of equally focused, hardworking citizens with a personal investment, and thus commitment, in making the nation and its economy, the entire system, work.

The same can be said for the other examples. As for ourselves, we have yet to be galvanized into such an army, perhaps because our marching orders are unclear, and because lingering doubts remain about the commitment of our commanders.

### **Focus, not distraction**

But then, we can ask: don't we Filipinos work hard enough? Aren't we, in fact, the workers and peons of the world?

Of course we do work, and of course we are the peons of the world. But the fruits of that labor are being frittered away, because what resources we have gathered are not being trained on priorities that will make a significant and strategic difference. We remain stuck in a maintenance mode, with expenditures premised more on accommodation than on real need.

Everywhere else in the world today, governments are gearing up to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the challenges of globalization, of integration, of achieving economies of scale. Nations are identifying and building up their comparative advantages—whether these be in agriculture, in manufacturing, or in high technology or science.

But here in the Philippines, we remain hobbled by an incrementalist, piecemeal frame of mind that will have spent more than ₱4 trillion over the last 5 years and will spend a trillion pesos next year without making any appreciable impact on society. We have amassed more than 4 trillion pesos of public debt for all kinds of programs and projects, and yet we hardly feel like a country striding forward into a bright new future.

Beyond the politics of the moment, we need a common objective that we can all rally behind as a matter of national survival and as our strategy for leaping forward in this century.

We can agree, for example, to give our children the best education they can possibly get by stopping the lip service and truly funding the sector as if our own children's education and futures were at stake.

If these were so, we can thus close the teacher gap (about 52,000 teachers and ₱7B per year), the classroom gap (45,000 classrooms at a one-time cost of about ₱20B) and the textbook gap (46 million books at about ₱3B) and ensuring the competence of our teachers.

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This will also mean implementing programs in support of education, such as a school feeding program that will not only nourish children but will also keep them in school, with the assurance that they will be fed.

Note that the ₱126B budget for the DepEd for next year, the largest in the bureaucracy, apart from excluding the abovementioned amounts, is misleading. Of this amount, ₱105B is for personal services while the ₱20B balance is presented as operating expense. Most of this is for the general maintenance overhead of the department, and not for the everyday needs of the students.

Leadership, taking responsibility for the education of our people (meaning getting really serious about it), will mean overhauling the budget (and the mindset that produced it), reallocating funds, cutting spending elsewhere, closing down unnecessary government programs, and applying sensible ideas wherever they may come from.

Or we can decide to truly make the domestic industry competitive: this will mean overhauling our thinking and premises on our economy. This will also mean adjusting our tariff policy, our energy policy, and our agriculture policy, among others.

Let me give you a for-instance. Chicken in Bangkok is about ₱70 a kilo. It's about a ₱110 here in our country. That means that for the same protein content, the Filipino worker will have to be 50 percent more productive than his counterpart. If that is the case, then the only way this can be justified for productivity purposes is if he is able to produce 50 percent more value than his counterpart, again underscoring the need for education that will give the Filipino worker the value-added that will differentiate his cost from that of his counterpart.

Or, we can accept that our economy is surviving off this huge air bubble of remittance-driven consumption. What has kept us afloat over these last few years, and is thus a central leg of our economy, are our OFWs.

But if we recognize OFWs to be our most valuable national resources, then by all means, let's support them to the fullest and extend them every form of assistance, from training them properly to educating them about their rights abroad. Let's turn our embassies from vacation homes to fully functioning service centers for OFWs. Let's go beyond the lip service of hailing OFWs as our "new heroes" while making them feel like strangers and interlopers in their own embassies and consulates.

The real benefit of this approach is that there will be an organizing focus to all decision-making. Thus government action can be more rational and predictable. And it will be easier for "we the people" to buy into a renewed and achievable Filipino Dream.

In other words, there are creative doables out there — initiatives that will make a concrete difference in the direction and spirit of this country within the next several years. We keep lamenting how Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and even Vietnam have single-mindedly

forged ahead of us. I am absolutely convinced that we have what it takes and can do what they have done, and more.

### **Get real**

What cannot work for us is a “business as usual” mentality, because business as usual can only mean certain stagnation and deterioration. Business as usual is what got us to where we are today.

What cannot work for us is more distraction, more illusion—the smoke and mirrors provided, for example, by an ill-timed initiative for Charter change, by creating new rules for governance even if or because we couldn’t enforce the old ones.

Let’s get real, let’s be honest with ourselves. As the ads says: *“Magpakatotoo tayo.”*

In other words, let government provide the enabling, nurturing, and invigorating environment within which private initiative and industry, meaning people taking responsibility for their lives, can grow and be properly rewarded.

Let government heed and respond to the people’s natural willingness to do the best and the right things for themselves and their children. Instead of telling people what to do and what not to do, the national leadership has to listen—to suffer criticism, if need be—if only to repair the floor upon which we all stand as a nation.

Trust is a two-way thing. The people are not only looking for someone to trust; they are also looking for someone who trusts them, who can bring out the leader in every citizen.

### **Eyes on the ball**

I look forward myself to a deeper engagement in the challenges and the daily grind of nation-building, within the ambit of my work as a senator.

In a sense, my life was simpler in the executive branch, when it was possible to initiate and implement reform within clearly defined zones and schedules. At the DTI, we were able to focus on the essentials, on strengthening the relationship between business and consumers. We closed down unproductive units, focused on deliverables, and developed industry plans for semiconductors and electronics, garments, auto completely built units (CBUs) and parts, ceramics and others, that up to today continue to be useful.

Our work in the Senate is broader in scope, covering every conceivable facet and concern of human life. The laws we craft are meant to last for generations, which is why we cannot take them lightly. We have a responsibility not only to ourselves and to the present moment, but also to the nation and the future at large.

This is why—even and especially in periods of crisis and high drama—we remember the importance of taking the long-term view and of the long-term solution, while continuing to mind the thousand-and-one items of legislative work. In other words, we must keep our eye on the ball—and the ball is not political power, but its application for the public good.

This, too, is a form of leadership: the practice of restraint, of simply saying “No”—no to the temptations of power, no to the excesses of others.

In a more constructive sense, my experience in both the legislative and executive branches of government tells me that the best thing we can often do is to make the system work at our level of competence and administration. Some things at the very top may be beyond our immediate control—but we can make our communities, towns, provinces, bureaus, and departments work the way they were meant to. And we must, because to allow them to fail would be to surrender to the even larger demons of cynicism and despair.

The gravest loss we have suffered from the current crisis is our faith in our ability to change things, to make them better. Again, this may be because we still see change in terms of the emergence of a charismatic savior who will wave a wand and set things right. This, to me, is the default option, the path of least resistance. If it happens at all—and I doubt that it will, or even that it should—it will be by sheer luck.

Let me repeat this for emphasis: There are no silver bullets, no bearded messiahs, but keep the faith! Change can come and change will come—we can make a fresh start on the Filipino Dream. And this is our responsibility to ourselves and our children. But we shall need to take personal responsibility for what happens. We need to adopt an alternative world view, rooted in an engagement of ideas and substance—not just of labels and uniforms, of this party or that faction—a dynamic that can look over the horizon of these confused and confusing times. I firmly believe that many other young Filipinos—many other leaders—have not given up on their future, have not surrendered their dreams. And I will be here—my nose to the grindstone—to support them.

~~Thank you all for your attention.~~

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