

# Project 2020 and Malaysia rich in information

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ON Feb 28, at the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Business Council, our Prime Minister had a duty to perform that most leaders of nations would have cherished and embraced with open arms.

He had to present a working paper on *Malaysia — the way forward*. His job was to set out, to a rather formidable group of Cabinet Ministers, top civil servants and national economic leaders, a manifesto for the nation for the next 30 years.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad did his duty and dutifully presented his own personal "vision" of the country that we should be by the year 2020, and what economic policies we should have in place in order that we can go from where we are today to where we must be at the end of our second generation as an independent country.

It could not have been an easy paper for Dr Mahathir to write. We know how he hates "visions" and abstract thinking. He is a hands-on person, very much interested in the here and now, rather than in some distant future.

dustrialisation. Now, increasingly," he said, "knowledge will not only be the basis of power but also prosperity.

"Computer literacy is a must if we want to progress and develop. No effort must be spared in the creation of an information-rich Malaysian society." The PM is right on course; but this is pretty strong stuff.

I have got three suggestions that I have been hawking around for years which the Government might wish to consider in order to move us further towards an information-rich society.

First, I think that every taxpayer should be allowed to claim a deduction from personal income tax for his purchases of newspapers, magazines and books — up to a certain fixed sum.

Provided that the taxpayer actually produces the receipts, why not allow him to deduct his reading-material expenses — up to a limit of, say, \$600 a year? This could be a powerful incentive for purchases of newspapers, magazines and books.

The increase in demand will generate more reading materials, will encourage a

Having gone through his speech several times, I have not been able to find that word, "vision", once. How tempting to have used such puns as "2020 vision". How did he resist it? How tempting to say at least once "I have a dream..."

Instead of being a little dreamy-eyed and eloquently rhetorical about Malaysia, he was, I think, very down to earth.

What is remarkable about *Malaysia — The Way Forward* is not its style or eloquence (which is par for the course) but its candour, balance and content.

If you haven't read it, you should. Because the document sets out in clear terms the objectives of Malaysia's Project 2020 and the key economic policies and strategies that the Prime Minister thinks should be pursued in the months and years to come.

Among the things that Dr Mahathir stressed and stressed so strongly was Malaysia must become "an information rich-society".

"It can be no accident that there is today no wealthy, developed country that is information-poor and no information-rich country that is poor and underdeveloped," he said.

"There was a time when land was the most fundamental basis of prosperity and wealth. Then came the second wave, the age of in-

boom in the publications industry (from whom we can of course collect more taxes). Who knows, we might even see bookshops that are prosperous not only in KL but throughout Malaysia.

The second idea is less daring. It is simple. If we are to become an information-rich society, we must have a national network of public libraries through the length and breadth of this country, in the remotest *ulu* as well as in the biggest cities. It is going to be expensive. But it must be done.

Thirdly, something that should be less financially painful, at least to the State. It is important that our television and radio programmes carry many more documentaries and information-rich shows.

I cannot believe the survey which showed that the average Malaysian reads one page of a book per year. At the same time, it is absolutely clear that Malaysia today is an information-poor country.

We cannot achieve the aspirations of Project 2020 if we remain in our present condition. And we need to act quickly and with determination if we are to become the information-rich society that we must be.

□ The views expressed above are entirely the personal opinions of the writer.