

02/06/1997

National pride comes to the fore

Hardev Kaur

"WE MISS you," a group of Malaysian students told Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the grounds of Warwick University as he was moving from one faculty to another to see for himself the research being undertaken there. With cameras in hand they stopped Dr Mahathir to take a group photo.

Malaysian students overseas are no longer inhibited from expressing their feelings or speaking their mind and like other Malaysians abroad, be they businessmen or otherwise, are proud to be Malaysians. The fact that Malaysia is increasingly better known, has meant that Malaysians are better able and willing to articulate government policies and the state of affairs in the country.

The national pride comes to the fore and is clearly demonstrated by those accompanying the Prime Minister abroad as well as the overseas students.

In Khazakstan and Krygyzstan for example, Malaysian businessmen, entrepreneurs and other Malaysians in the delegation, sang the National Anthem when it was played.

On his overseas trips, the Prime Minister is constantly mobbed by students and other Malaysians. Being stopped by Malaysian students abroad, Malaysian businessmen and even by journalists to have their photos taken with the Prime Minister is becoming increasingly common these days.

In addition students also seek him out for his autograph and to shake his hand and to salam.

On his most recent trip to London to promote the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) Dr Mahathir had to make several "unscheduled photo stops" at Imperial College, Warwick University and St Mary's Hospital to talk to Malaysian students and to oblige them by posing for photographs with them.

Despite his hectic schedule, the Prime Minister does not disappoint students. He makes it a point to talk to them and patiently answers their questions, no matter how many times he has been asked the same question by students overseas.

When asked, on one of his recent trip, whether he was tired of answering the same question over the years from Malaysian students abroad, Dr Mahathir replied "No".

He reasoned that even though the question may be the same, those posing the question each time were different individuals and the audience was a different group.

The question most often posed used to be what the Government was doing about insufficient scholarship funds. In the mid-1980s when the country was faced with an economic recession and in the early 1980s when the unemployment rate was high the main questions were related to employment on returning home.

However this is changing and changing for the better. The questions being posed these days are of a wider nature and related to policy issues, developments in the country - political, economic and social - and are not self-centred or about insufficient funds for scholarships.

Increasingly they are concerned about is what is happening at home. At Warwick for example they wanted to know what is being done to prepare the country to face competition as a financial centre in the 21st century; safeguarding the environment; whether recession is inevitable as some reports suggest that the country is "over heating" due to rapid

development; erosion of morality and the culture and Malaysia as a spokesman for the Third World;

Dr Mahathir noted that even the crowd is more representative of all Malaysian races rather than comprising just one race.

Like a father advising his children Dr Mahathir urged them to study hard, whether they were on government scholarships or whether they were financed by their parents.

He told them that money is not everything as he himself found out. "But what gives me the greatest satisfaction is to see the country growing, developing and slowly being recognised as a player in a number of areas."

The students, he said, should have a sense of pride in the quality of their own work. They should strive to be the best in whatever they undertook and did. "Today Malaysians can stand tall among others, and that is important," Dr Mahathir told the students in Warwick University last week.

Addressing a group of students who were clearly born after Independence, the Prime Minister told them "As a colony we were looked down upon. Today the satisfaction is that we can run our own country and do a better job at it.

"Today we do not feel so inferior because of the progress that has been made. We have shown that we can do a better job and that we can administer our own country better."

He urged the students to "return home after completing your studies ...even if you get married...come back to serve the country and contribute to its development".

With Vision 2020 the Government has set the stage for the country to achieve developed nation status in "our own mould". The process has been started, Dr Mahathir told the students adding, "It is for you to complete it...

"You are being prepared to assist us in areas for which you are being trained. While here do not waste time," Dr Mahathir said. "As a developing country we cannot afford to waste time and money. You are here to study and I hope you study and study very hard."

He told the students that "learning does not stop or end" adding, "I have come here to learn ... and it was an education. And I will be better able to see what we can do with our industries. And you are fortunate to be studying here".

Before meeting the students in the packed Arts Theatre, the Prime Minister had been given a briefing and a tour of the Warwick University and the work that was being undertaken by the Warwick Manufacturing Group.

The Warwick Manufacturing Group, founded in 1990, is a partnership between the university and the industrial sector with emphasis on joint research between the academia and manufacturers.

Malaysian students overseas are also beginning to organise themselves better in their effort to put Malaysia on the map. They organise Malaysian cultural events, not only to co-incide with National Day celebrations or Hari Raya.

A group of students at the George Washington University in Washington DC last year, for example, organised a Malaysian evening - with Malaysian food and cultural dances and "sold the country" to their fellow students, lecturers and visitors to the University.

In their own way they have helped put Malaysia on the world map and acted as responsible Malaysian citizens.

But their work does not end there. They must, in the words of the Prime Minister, "return home to assist and contribute in its further development".

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