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Proton must be grateful to pioneers

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A DECADE and one million cars later Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Berhad, or in short Proton, has indeed come a long way. Proton has become a household name and the national car project precipitated the transformation of the country's industrialisation policy. It gives meaning to the Malaysia boleh (Malaysia can) slogan.

Ten years is not long in the automotive industry. But for a developing economy, a decade is a long enough for a venture to be considered feasible.

Also, in a rapidly developing economy like ours, many more things happen in a decade than in a mature economy; too many perhaps for people to remember and put them in perspective.

Therefore, it should not come as a surprise if many of today's Proton managers and workers are not fully aware of the early days of the project.

As Proton celebrates the rolling-out of its one millionth unit this week, it is important to remind its owners, managers and workers of the birth pangs it went through and the sacrifices made to build Proton into what it is today.

They must recognise the sufferings and sacrifices of these pioneers even while enjoying the rewards and the glory of being new Proton owners and members of the Proton team.

I am not suggesting that the Government and the mass media are wrong in putting the new Proton boss, Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad, on the pedestal. Nobody can doubt his academic and business credentials, and his prowess as entrepreneur-manager.

But certain things have to be put in perspective before we can truly judge Yahaya, his managers and workers.

Prominent among these is the fact that Yahaya did not experience the birth pain of Proton. Neither did he put in billions of ringgit of seed money into the venture nor suffer political pillory.

But the then 2M Government (Mahathir-Musa) did face stiff opposition and outright ridicule when it mooted the idea in the early 1980s.

Some political observers later made the claim that it was from this project that they first detected the rift between Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tan Sri Musa Hitam.