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### Towards modern farming

THIS newspaper yesterday published a picture of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tagging a cow at an integrated farming project in Kulai, Johor. The outfit the Prime Minister was in while carrying out the tagging, and the action itself portrayed the modern day farmer Malaysia hopes to have. It is the kind of farming Malaysia, with its fertile soil and plenty of land must move into. Not the yesteryears' method of slash and burn, or where each farmer works a tiny patch of land which are often passed down through generations. Then crops were mostly for own consumption with the farming methods used usually primitive, based on small-scale production. Ideas of large-scale marketing was almost non-existence. The kind of farming Malaysia desires to have is perhaps similar to that practised at dairy farms in the UK and New Zealand, the cattle ranches in the American Mid-west or the wheatfields in Canada.

But first of all, the perception that farming is toiling under the hot sun with meagre income and borderline poverty must change. Malaysians who have shunned farming must realise that the UK, Canada and the US are developed countries and New Zealand, while largely recognised as one of the world's leading dairy producer than anything else, is as advanced as any of the three. Malaysians must also do away with the thoughts of only small-scale farming. They must aim for dotting the rice fields with grain silos, with mechanised harvesters with minimal human workforce working like those on the Canadian Prairie, or rearing sheep or cattle using the paddock system often practised in New Zealand and central Wales in the UK, or even engage in integrated farming in producing several crops and like their counterparts in the manufacturing sector, the modern Malaysian farmer must also be involved in research and development - for new crops, new farming methods and new markets.

Late last year the Prime Minister spoke of a plan to establish a pilot project for mixed and integrated modern farming village on a 10,000ha land in Kedah. The project was to start with the Royal College of Agriculture, England as adviser. Mixed crop would be planted in the area, which would also be turned into a tourist attraction. The idea of making the project a tourist attraction should not be too difficult to realise, considering green fields filled with foodstuffs and grazing cattle and sheep would surely make more beautiful sights than many of the championship status golf courses lying around Malaysia, not to mention the comparison in purposes both serve.

However, other states have yet to catch on with the idea in similar zest as they take in proposals for development of country home projects. Perhaps, even state governments have yet to see the real benefits of large-scale integrated and modern farming. Many leaders, it seems, have got so engrossed in encouraging the population to stay away from designer labels imported from Italy and New York that they have forgotten that Malaysia remain not self-sufficient when it comes to food.

The country's food import bill rose to a hefty RM11.43 billion in 1997. It imported RM1.6 million worth of vegetables from neighbouring Thailand in January 1998 alone. The irony is that most of the vegetables imported are those that can be planted easily in Malaysia. They include sawi, chilli, ginger and tomatoes. This situation surely requires some close examination.

As for Malaysians, they cannot always depend on the Government to extend

incentives, loans and subsidies before they start venturing into farming. The fact that the country still has a large food import bill suggests that the market for such items is big enough to provide them with lucrative income.

The private sector, especially financial institutions, can participate in providing the necessary infrastructure backing such as making financing easier for farming projects. Financiers should face much lesser risks, considering with integrated farming, farms they finance would be less exposed to risks of being dependent on prices of single crops. At any rate, the credit risk involved will not be more than extending financing for customers to purchase company shares on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange. In fact, the risk could even be less.

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