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## A say in the nation's future

MUCH, if not all, of the balanced development and rapid progress of the last three decades, achieved in an environment of political stability and racial harmony, was due to the national two-pronged strategy to eradicate poverty and ensure equitable sharing of the growing wealth of the country as advocated by the National Economic Policy (NEP) and its successor the National Development Policy (NDP). For the year 2000 and beyond, the 155-member Second National Economic Consultative Council (NECC II) has been established, and started work yesterday on an appropriate policy to replace the NDP. There is little doubt that the spirit of the NEP and the NDP will live on, for to discard the success formula now would be ill-advised, considering that so much obviously remains to be done before the year 2020 when Malaysia is to have achieved developed nation status. It is of particular significance that the NECC II is starting work to help shape the destiny of the nation at a time when the economy and Malaysians in general are just recovering from the devastating effects of the past two years' regional financial crisis. The NEP was formulated following one of the darkest hours in the country's history, the racial riots in 1969. A painful lesson it was, but one well-learnt by the nation and its people; that it is far better to work together and share in the wealth of a fast growing economy, than to fight over the spoils of a stagnant, or worse, shrinking one, which would have been the case if the country is in constant strife.

In darkness is an opportunity to look within, something which people tend to forget to do when the days are bright and sunny, and appear endless. The events following the devaluation of the Thai baht in July 1997 are a stark reminder that even the best-run companies and economies cannot take things for granted, that the only defence they have to counter threats to their well-being is to be prepared, if not for the worst than for the unlikeliest of circumstances. There is no substitute for a solid foundation to face ill winds, and if the weather had been stormy in the closing years of this millennium, that in the new one promises to be downright treacherous.

When launching the NECC II, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad warned of the challenges to "all aspects of our lives" that would come with globalisation and the cross-border free flow of trade, capital, workers, technology and information. New strategies will have to be drawn up, new fields of economic activities identified and pursued, and new skills learnt. Most importantly, in the pursuit of a culture of excellence, a new breed of entrepreneurs will have to be nurtured. The focus of the NEP and NDP had been on creating Bumiputera entrepreneurs. Now the country needs world-class Malaysian entrepreneurs, the Prime Minister said, prime-movers who are to play a central role in hauling the economy ever closer to achieving its Vision 2020 aspirations.

The NECC II's 155 members have until September 2000 to come up with a report for the Cabinet. Among them are representatives of trade and industry organisations; chambers of commerce; professional bodies; employers' groups and workers' unions; women's, youth and social organisations; and political parties. Prominent individuals, students and pensioners are also given an opportunity to provide input and engage in a free exchange of ideas and opinions. It is a unique policy-making process, one that reflects the Government's recognition of the right of Malaysians

from all walks of life to a say in the nation's future. Conspicuous in their absence, however, are the opposition party leaders, who have rejected an invitation to take part in the council. Sadly, they are unable to put national interest above politics and personal agendas. Much as their views would have been appreciated, their non-participation is no big loss to the council and the nation if the only concern to them is to have things their way. Indeed, they are the losers, having forfeited the chance to be part of a historic forum.

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