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Dr M's simple but effective message that drives home the point

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ON Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's whirlwind cross-State campaign trail, his message becomes crystal clear, sometimes in the unlikeliest of places.

Which, in one case, was on a dusty clearing flanked by padi fields in the small town of Pendang in Kedah, where the Prime Minister explained to a gathering of padi farmers and their families why they should vote for the Barisan Nasional.

Amid the distinctive smell of rolled cigarettes wafting in the hot afternoon air, Dr Mahathir opened with his recollection of what it was like for him to campaign in Pendang in the early seventies, when there were no paved roads.

"I had to travel by an open-topped Land Rover through bumpy trails, and by the time I reached the venue everyone laughed at me - my face was covered in dust!"

He then went for the kill. That speech quickly transcended the dusty roads of Pendang of the past to its current state of paved roads, hospitals and schools, and from that to a world view including the likes of the International Monetary Fund and its grand design on the people of Pendang.

Back and forth his perspective swayed, from past to present and micro to macro; from the comical inconsistencies of Pas' Mohamad Sabu hating Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim one day and loving him the next; to the insolence of United States vice-president Al Gore for voicing support for the street demonstrations during last November's Apec Summit in Kuala Lumpur.

Each time, the link was clearly established between examples, like how a fabricated tale of a young child's demise due to starvation led a young student leader named Anwar to incite student demonstrations and eventually built up into his suspiciously close ties to the US Secretary of Defence.

"We always forget. We forget the past and only remember the present." The previous day, Dr Mahathir had explained how the Muda irrigation scheme to enable twice-yearly crop planting, was met with hostility by the narrow-minded Pas.

Pas, Dr Mahathir said, had said that padi should not be planted twice a year as this would not enable the soil to "rest". He pointed out that the double-planting had yielded good results and even farmers aligned to Pas had benefitted from it.

"But Pas has conveniently forgotten this," he added, driving home the point.

Apart from urging voters to keep the present political climate within its proper historical frame, he drills into voters the need to keep in context 'issues' whipped up by the Opposition.

A favourite example of Dr Mahathir is the case of a person who went to a newly-built hospital and cursed the Government which built it - because the lift took too long to arrive.

"They realise we have been able to bring about many developments. So they point out the minute flaws and urge people to blame the Government."

This barb was also targeted at middle-class urbanites, among whom these issues are rumoured to feature prominently.

"May be among the so-called intellectuals in Kuala Lumpur, these issues are important, but here, they are interested in basic things," he said after filing his nomination papers in Kubang Pasu.

Dr Mahathir's simple message, relayed over and over again, is that it is

dangerous to place too much emphasis on the minute at the expense of the bigger picture.

His critics balk at his repetitive reminders on the need to look at the bigger picture, claiming that the only people who get to see an accurate depiction of this "Big Picture" are those who step out from the frame - out of the mainstream but closest to the "disenfranchised" in society - in other words, what the Opposition claims itself to be.

Ironically, Dr Mahathir's simple message also comes from an outsider's perspective. At a meeting with BN party workers in Jitra, Dr Mahathir said that Malaysia had to adopt its own unique approach to governance because other models such as socialism, communism and free-market capitalism had proven to be unsuccessful and unsuitable.

Later, after completing a hectic evening's schedule in Sabah, Dr Mahathir, visibly tired, was asked whether the BN was going to "drop any bombs" on the eve of polling.

His succinct reply: "We don't use bombs. We use ordinary, simple arguments, free, united and successful, which everybody can understand."

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