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Farm estates for food boost

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad never tires of extolling people to better their lives. That is the role of a leader, to move and lift the sights of people beyond their petty preoccupations and personal strifes to lofty ideals. Goals by definition must be lofty, otherwise ambitions would not be ambitions. When he assumed the office of Prime Minister 19 years ago, he extolled the virtues of mini-estates, citing the success of the Felda scheme. That would be the way to a betterment of the lives of farmers. And, more importantly, it would yield more food and more wealth for the country.

Two decades have passed. The country has quickened to be among the developed among developing nations, overcoming two recessions. But we are still dependent on imports of food. Meat, rice and fruits. The annual food import bill totals RM11 billion. Farmers, with smallholdings, are still among the poorest. The equation has to be changed, indeed must be changed, if farmers' lives are to be ameliorated and the country to be self-sufficient in food. And it requires a radical change in the age-old perception of farmers that land is wealth. That is the gist and grist of the speech Dr Mahathir delivered last Saturday when he opened the Malaysian Agriculture, Horticultural and Agro-Tourism exhibition.

True, land is precious if only because nature does not yield any more hectares. We can carve out some more but only through expensive reclamations of our coastlines. It is equally true, the sale of several hectares of agricultural land, especially those in the vicinity of urban areas, can accord handsome sums of money. But that would be wealth dissipated over a few or several years. Dr Mahathir did not spell this out. As the Prime Minister, his role is to reel out the philosophy. The big picture. His call to farmers with smallholdings is to amalgamate. Form mini-estates. Own shares in these agricultural land-owning companies instead of remaining owners of a few hectares. That would be more rewarding, not only for the farmer, his family but also for the country.

Smallholdings are inefficient businesses these days. They do not provide sufficient and enduring wealth. They cannot be developed to their full potential. Technology and management can. But no small farmer can afford the technology nor has the professional skill to till and harvest the bounty his small hectares can yield. Exchanging ownership of small pieces of land for shares in plantation companies would maximise the income of the farmer for many, many years.

That is not the only vision of the Prime Minister. He has said that the Government will introduce the concept of mixed farming that would boost food production. Different crops or vegetables can be grown in different types of soil. We have government departments and agencies that have the expertise to advise on the right choice. Livestock breeding could also be nurtured in these large farms which would have the financial wherewithal to employ professional management. The ultimate objective is to be self-sufficient in food production. The exaltation of being a developed country would be tainted if we do not produce enough food for ourselves. That country could be rudderless to that goal if farmers discard old percepts of land ownership. Land might have been wealth. But that does not hold true anymore. These days shares in land-owning companies have more value. They appreciate in prices and they can be traded.

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