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Chance encounter with the most sought-after politician

Dzulkarnain Taib

MOST times you need a nose for news to get hot stories. Sometimes you just bump into Tun Daim Zainuddin having teh tarik at a Bangsar restaurant.

There he was at a favourite roti canai and teh tarik establishment in Lucky Garden casually dressed in a collared T-shirt, khaki pants and sandals. Daim looked more relaxed than he ever was when he was a Cabinet minister.

To understand why a chance meeting with Daim in Akbar Shah, a purveyor of fine teas and lamb briyani, is such a big deal you just have to remember that he is the most sought-after politician since his surprise resignation from his Finance Minister and Umno post in June.

"Is Business Times still anti-Government?" he said jokingly with a smile, referring to an incident when he gently ticked off a Business Times reporter for asking a "sensitive" question at a seminar organised by a youth organisation.

Daim has a style of his own when it comes to handling the Press.

He neither says too much to the extent of revealing everything nor hides everything to a point of being secretive.

Asked why he decided to leave when his services were still needed to see the country through its economic difficulties, Daim said the time has come for him to go.

"I need to retire someday. I am already old," he said, sipping his tea.

Daim said he has not been open to questions from the Press because he did not want to get embroiled in any speculation.

"There is too much speculation going around and it's better to keep quiet. Even Dr Mahathir advised me not to say anything," he added in this unplanned encounter.

His view of the present state of journalism in the country was that newspapers tend to over-speculate on many issues and this has resulted in an unhealthy state of affairs.

"When I left there was so much speculation and they are not even true," he stressed.

"We should be responsible in what we write because it affects what or who we are writing about," he advised.

Speculation was rife that there was a personal conflict between him and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that led to his resignation but it is a fact that the relationship between both leaders goes a long way, close to three decades.

A relationship and friendship that long could never be shaken by mere rumour-mongering and bad-mouthing.

In both the periods that he served as the finance minister, the country experienced economic downturn as a result of weak global economic conditions.

The 1998 Asian financial crisis must have been one of the most trying and traumatic period for the country that saw countries in the region plunge into a deep economic crisis due to attacks on their currencies.

The Prime Minister and his economic team which included Daim managed to successfully insulate and protect the economy from further damage through the implementation of selective capital and currency controls.

The three years to re-inject confidence in the stock market, stabilise the financial system including recapitalising the banks and restructuring bad loans, heading the National Economic Action Council and attending its

daily meetings plus a long series of ministerial duties and political responsibilities must have taken quite a toll on Daim.

Now that he is no longer holding any government or party post except for being the elected Member of Parliament for Merbok, maybe history can look back at his achievements and services that he has rendered to the nation with greater objectivity.

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