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Why leadership is essential in a country's development

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AT the opening of an electronic wafer fabrication plant in Kuching last year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke on leadership as only someone in his position is qualified to do so.

The Prime Minister's theme for that particular speech is telling and not unrelated to the opening of a US\$1 billion (RM3.8 billion) facility, then a first in the entire country, to produce state-of-the-art wafer chips.

What the Prime Minister was driving home was the fact that were it not for the critical difference that leadership provides, the wafer plant would never be built.

There will be the usual political opposition critics to contend with and the just as predictable posse of assorted sceptics and vested interests whose purpose in life would seem to be to derail any proposal, more so a proposal as the wafer plant in Sarawak.

There was the by now familiar prime-ministerial refrain that had the sceptics ruled the day, Malaysians would still largely be rubber tappers and tin miners today.

Sure there were the cases of blunders, some rather monumental, but whoever said the learning curve would not be steep for those particularly bold and brave?

The wafer plant in Sarawak is a deliberate and considered strategy for the State to leapfrog from the tropical rainforests into the front ranks of cutting-edge high technology.

Plantations for cash crops are a bright spot which Sarawak is currently exploiting but conditions, both physical and cultural, do not lend themselves easily to highly-mechanised agriculture which would be the most obvious route for the State to take.

Traditional export industries, on the other hand, in an area with a small population and outside the major shipping routes, will be flattened with the first whiff of China.

Sarawak, therefore, has to leverage whatever advantages it currently possesses to build a sustainable economy for the long haul.

Unfortunately, many such options are high-cost, capital-intensive propositions.

The Bakun Hydro-electric Dam, for example, has been on the drawing board for decades and would have remained so were it not for Dr Mahathir.

Amassing the required capital to invest in big-ticket industrial or infrastructure projects is often not a problem.

A far more common problem is usually finding a government with the necessary clout and leadership vision to deliver on promises to see projects through.

That is the unique advantage that both the Sarawak Government and the Federal Government currently have.

It is an advantage which many countries only dream about and rightly, if secretly, envy us for.

Leaders, like all of us, are of course also fallible. The reason why Dr Mahathir has so often proven critics and sceptics wrong is not because he enjoys any superhuman insights that the rest of us do not have access to.

Rather, it is because he has the tenacity and uncommon will to personally and directly bring his leadership to bear on things he wants done.

Economic analysts working on crunching only numbers and figures will

naturally often come up sceptical about ideas our leaders have.

If only a rare commodity such as political leadership - how effectively exercised it has been - can be reduced into certain exact numerical equations for professionals to factor into and arrive at workable business models.

Alas, even visionary leaders do not possess crystal balls to enable them to see a global high-technology boom turn bust.

The normal cyclical twists and turns of the industry's trajectory can be studied and carefully analysed.

There is no precedent, however, for a global high-technology melt-down.

The nay-sayers may now be out in droves, falling over each other with their predictable chorus of "I told you so".

Wouldn't a little bit of caution be in order, I can hear them baying. Forgetting, as usual, that would be the very antithesis of leadership.

Leaders who can soar great heights can usually climb out of holes they inevitably find along their paths.

Unless we won't let them, just so we can continue to spite them - and ourselves - with our only real weapon, the "I told you so".