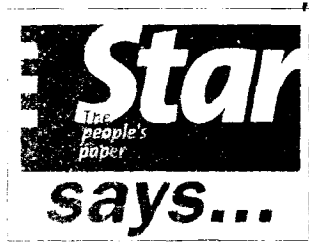


At 3pm today, Dr Mahathir will hand over the reins of the country to Pak Lah

Heartfelt thanks

STAR 31 OCT 2003



IT WILL feel strange for a while – to no longer have Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister.

He has been such a large presence in our lives – a generation of Malaysians has known no other prime minister – that the emptiness may linger for some time.

And at such a time we may begin to realise, finally, the enormous responsibilities the man had to shoulder and what he achieved.

Even so, we need to record some of his achievements – Petronas Twin Towers, KL International Airport, Putrajaya – modern-day monuments, yet economic dynamos in their own right.

Those are the obvious examples. Doubtless, he did more than just put Malaysia on the track to developed-nation status.

As we begin to reflect on the last two decades, we would appreciate that the list would be endless if we were to itemise what Dr Mahathir has done for Malaysia and Malaysians.

The list would also be endless if we were to count the times he has lambasted the West and the superpowers and spoken up for Third World countries and what he saw as injustices.

And, oh yes, the number of times he has scolded us for various reasons, but invariably for our own good.

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We are heading in the right direction

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Truly, this man has been a father to us. And like all fathers, he wanted to see us not merely succeed but to stretch ourselves and touch the dreams that we dreamt. His dreams have been our dreams.

We have had fathers guiding us since this nation was born. Dr Mahathir has been different. He was there for us for the longest time. For all kinds of circumstances. He was our leader for almost half the time we have been independent.

And like most children, we have at times been rebellious and turned a deaf ear to his pleas. Still, he trudged on, believing what he was doing was in our best interest.

A management guru once said: "Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it's amazing what they can accomplish. High expectations are the key to everything."

Dr Mahathir had high hopes for us.

He knew what he had to do. So he went out of his way, sometimes to much opposition, which he would silence with his simple logic to prod us to give our best.

He used tested means. He tried unconventional methods. Someone has said that you cannot achieve the impossible without attempting the absurd.

If the ways he used were absurd — and some more-superior-than-thou countries have described them in more disparaging terms — the results have been absolutely unabsurd.

For some time now, we have been proud to call ourselves Malaysian. This pride is shared even by those beyond our shores — other nations have been equally proud that Dr Mahathir stood up for them, too.

Others outside see us as an exemplary nation, yet within, we struggle and contend with one another. He reprimanded, pleaded, cried, prayed, so that we would see beyond our differences.

He forged a common bond among

us, we who held so tightly to our communal and cultural identities, fearing that we would lose all that our forebears had passed down as our heritage.

When he announced he was quitting, his one regret was that he had failed to change the Malays. The other communities have been equally guilty of wanting to remain static.

If that was his failure, it was ours, too. Perhaps we didn't see his vision too well. He was always looking to the future; we were content with living in the present, with a yearning for the past.

Perhaps we thought he would see us through by sheer force of his will. Now we realise he was all too human, like us.

In spite of ourselves, we have come a long way. That's nothing short of miraculous. And Dr Mahathir played no small part in firing us up with a spirit of nationalism and unity that will power us on.

He has led us on a remarkable and unforgettable phase of the great

Malaysian odyssey.

The journey is far from over, but we're heading in the right direction, and that's something we must be thankful for.

Dr Mahathir has ensured a smooth passing of the baton by raising up a worthy successor in the person of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to carry on the task of leading this nation.

He has left no loose ends. To paraphrase him: he has made sure everything is in place.

If we believe in even half the things we say that Dr Mahathir has done for us then it would be a great legacy that he has left us, one that should propel us forward to continue where he left off and fulfil those aspirations he very much wanted to see us attain.

Words won't adequately express what we want to tell him. We can only simply say: We promise we will carry on what you have started.

Mr Prime Minister, a very grateful nation thanks you from the bottom of our hearts.