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Message from Kumar Tharmalingam, Immediate Past President

THE early years of my business life from 1970 to 1980 were very ordinary and very basic, for this was the period when the people of Malaysia tried to come to terms with the fractious elections of May 1969.

The excitement in my chosen field of real estate started when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Prime Minister in 1981. Suddenly, the whole nation began to realise that rather than be followers of world trends to make our place in the sun, we could be leaders.

Throughout history, many leaders have only wanted fame and fortune for themselves (consider those in some African and Latin American nations). However, Dr Mahathir's philosophy was to increase the size of the economic cake, so that a larger one for the same population would make everyone wealthy irrespective of how it is shared, since everyone would have more.

His drive for continuous infrastructure development, providing seed money for new ideas, relishing and supporting innovative technology and moving Malaysia into an industrial nation; and then making the leapfrog into an IT savvy nation as the Internet revolution emerged, and creating the Multimedia Super Corridor was no small feat. Pushing, pulling, funding and cajoling, he generally dragged the rather timid citizens of this country to stand up and say, Malaysia Boleh!

All these were achieved in one generation. In my entire productive business life, I have only had one Prime Minister but in the 22 years of Dr Mahathir's leadership, he has metamorphosed into many versions of the same man. The Prime Minister who took office in 1980 was not the same one in 1985: He was a different man with different ideas. And so it happened again in 1990; he came with different agendas in 1995, and yet again in 2000.

Dr Mahathir never failed to surprise me, with new ideas for tourism and business that he came back with every time he returned from his travels. He dragged Malaysian companies to start building projects and ignored the conventional wisdom of investing only in developed countries.

I have listened to Dr Mahathir's Budget dialogues. Each year, he focused his vision on new aspects of doing business, building projects, improving lives, building new facilities, new highways and bringing comfortable living conditions to every corner of Malaysia. Realising that the public sector could not cope with his urgent time frame, privatisation became the cornerstone of his thrust to fast-track Malaysia into the 21st century.

Of course, not all of Dr Mahathir's projects worked, not because his vision was faulty, but rather, because those appointed to implement them sometimes failed him. A lesser man would have become tired of flogging his people to excel, or trying to increase the indigenous wealth of every citizen, but Dr Mahathir never gave up.

Some time ago a politician from a neighbouring country was asked to compare the quality of life of Malaysians with the quality of life of the people in his country. He thought for a minute and, though the nuances of his words would have been lost in translation, he was quoted as having said: "In my country, my people survive; in Malaysia, your people live."

The future of a democratic nation's survival depends on how the policies and politics of the country protect the average citizen's wealth over the years.

It is safe to say that Dr Mahathir has protected the wealth of this nation well over his 22 years in office. It is a record that is the envy

of emerging economies all over the world.

We certainly are proud to give Dr Mahathir this Fiabci Award for Nation Building.

KUMAR THARMALINGAM
IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT

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