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The best ideas must prevail

By Brendan Pereira

PITY that the Prime Minister's heart-to-heart talk with the country's top civil servants on Thursday did not reach a wider audience.

Some of the home-truths he handed down at the Putrajaya Convention Centre would have offered some degree of comfort to many Malaysians, who sometimes wonder if the prosperity this country enjoys is due to its abundant natural wealth or because enough thought has and is being put into its long-term development.

Make no mistake, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's 90-minute session was not only meant for civil servants. It had something for everyone.

* For the one million civil servants.

Perhaps of all the nuggets of advice he dished out, the most important was this: that the best ideas must prevail.

"The supremacy of the best ideas must be recognised. There is no protocol when it comes to ideas. It does not mean that we as leaders surrender our power or that we are less respected," he said.

This may seem like a revolutionary concept in the top-down world of decision-making in the public sector.

But guess what? Malaysia from the time of Tunku Abdul Rahman has embraced the idea of the supremacy of the best ideas.

That was why the Government then staffed some of the key institutions of the day like the Economic Planning Unit with Harvard-trained economists.

It could have been so easy for Tunku or Tun Abdul Razak to pander to narrow nationalist demands of the time and insist on a Malaysian-only approach.

But they understood one crucial fact - that great ideas or talent do not reside within the boundaries of a country. It is everywhere and must be tapped.

It is this kind of enlightened thinking which allowed Just Faaland to give valuable input into the drafting of the Department of National Unity document - the framework of the New Economic Policy, Malaysia's famous affirmative action programme.

Over the years, other Malaysian leaders have also leaned heavily on foreigners. When Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was Deputy PM and Minister for Trade and Industry in the late 1970s, Kenichi Ohmae, then a consultant for McKinsey & Co, was doing work for the Malaysian Government on industrialisation.

After he took over as PM, Dr Mahathir got advice from Ohmae on the nation's heavy industries.

Even the idea of the Multimedia Super Corridor was hatched by the Japanese author and management consultant. In 1995, he came up with an idea to lift Japan's depression-hit economy out of the rut and to position the country toward becoming the most technologically advanced society in the world.

Ohmae proposed that Japan build a wired corridor - called The Corridor - from Yokohama port to downtown Tokyo. The idea was not followed up in Japan, but embraced in Kuala Lumpur.

So this idea of being open to adopting the best ideas - no matter where or whom they originate from - is not unheard of in Malaysia. It is part of the country's tradition.

But in a world where competitiveness and productivity decide a country's economic prosperity, there is a need to reinforce the supremacy of best

ideas concept.

That is why it is heartening to note that a group of Harvard University's top brains have been brought in to study the public sector and suggest ways to re-engineer the civil service.

That is also why Malaysian politicians and decision-makers must be open to the possibility of bringing in the best brains from around the world to provide input for the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

Only the best ideas and talent must drive the country's economic future. Second best will not do.

* For government-linked companies, civil servants, people in the service industry, politicians, etc.

Without doubt, one of Abdullah's pet topics is improving the public delivery system.

On Thursday, he noted that the system had improved, but was troubled that people were still being sent from pillar to post by civil servants.

"We cannot treat the public in this manner. We cannot kick them around like footballs. We cannot just pass the buck," he said.

He urged civil servants to imagine how they would feel if they were given the runaround.

His audience was the public sector, but his message of "stepping into the other person's shoes" should resonate with many of us.

It could easily apply to the top management of Tenaga Nasional Berhad. After two Press conferences, the country is none the wiser why the back-up system failed on Jan 13.

So far, consumers and the Press have been living off scraps.

Not surprisingly, this absence of information has led to speculation - from the possibility of sabotage to the probability that key components in the system were outdated.

Only timely sharing of information and a candid appraisal of the electricity supply system will give consumers a sense of confidence with TNB, and stop it from hyperventilating the next time someone shouts "Tariff increase".

It's not rocket science. It is the human psyche. We are more charitable when others are generous with explanations and real reasons for failure.

(END) Source : New Straits Times