

16/11/2003

A gem if not for the jam

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THE day after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad retired, we broke fast in the car. We were caught - and on a Saturday! - in one of the worst jams ever, just before the Puchong end of the Damansara-Puchong expressway.

I had some leftover dates in the car; at the sound of the Azan from a thousand car stereos, I shared those with the kids. To keep them occupied, I let them pop their heads out of the sunroof to view the sea of vehicles. That ought to make them love traffic jams!

When you're driving, you miss the scenery. In the jam, I was able to take in details that would otherwise have been a blur outside the speeding car; for example, the two huge posters put up by Litrak, the toll operator, on top of the toll structure. One congratulates Pak Lah, the new PM, the other thanks Dr M, the ex-PM.

"Abah, Malaysia tak kuat lagi kan because Dr Mahathir dah tak ada?," the boy told me. He was looking where I was and I was amazed by the boy's general knowledge.

"No, we are still mighty, kiddo." We just need to stay united. Pak Lah must make sure we are not divided.

"Have I met him?" he asked.

"Nope, you have not. The one you met was the other former deputy prime minister. You were four."

"Oh, that one in jail. I don't remember. Abah selalu jumpa Dr Mahathir kan? Pak Lah kuat tak?"

"They are all very strong. Can you not eat all of it, please, and let me have some."

And eight-year-old Ahirul continued to gaze at the pictures on the posters for a little while. And then he found something to squabble over with his baby sister.

Chewing dates, I went back to the posters. And thought, yes, Litrak ought to say a big "thank you" to Dr Mahathir. The others too: PLUS, UEM, Elite, Touch `n' Go, etc.

If Dr M had not opened the doors, the private sector would still not know how to build roads, flyovers, bridges and causeways. JKR would still be doing all that.

And if Dr Mahathir had not defended the need for toll and convinced taxpayers of the necessity for privatisation, there would have been no Litrak, no PLUS, no Touch `n' Go.

But I thought they should do more than just say "thank you". They can make sure that the concept works even after Dr Mahathir is no more PM.

Certainly on that day after his retirement, when we were caught in that massive jam, the concept - that a tolled highway would make life easier - did not work.

Damansara to Puchong took just 15 minutes. Which was so fine. But 45 minutes at the toll? What is that?