

28/01/2003

#### Clearing the decks for new helmsman

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said that he was serious when he suggested that elected representatives from Umno should take the cue from the Pahang Menteri Besar and state executive councillors and offer to resign. This would allow Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to form his own line-up for the next general election. The ball is now in the court of the Umno MPs and assemblymen.

It is certainly a good idea to give Abdullah a free hand. It would enable him to clear the decks, because, as Dr Mahathir pointed out, some Umno representatives appointed by him "have been around for a long time" - too long, perhaps.

Given the chance to start with a new slate of candidates, Abdullah can be expected to display the same pragmatism and realism that saw him, for example, make the recent pledge which reaffirmed continuity in policy when Dr Mahathir steps down. This is the kind of practical, down-to-earth approach that can be expected if Umno gives him carte blanche to choose candidates.

There's no doubt Abdullah's selection will be based on the merit, character, ability and track record of the aspirants. We can expect to see changes in personnel, not just in Umno. While Umno is not an Augean stable that needs to be cleaned out, like every organisation, it needs new faces from time to time. The disastrous defeats of Umno in Kelantan and Terengganu demonstrate all too painfully what can happen when it is not able to find new leadership capable of responding to changes in the political environment.

It would, of course, be imprudent to cast off all the seasoned veterans just for the sake of change. Since there is no substitute for experience, the list of candidates should be a judicious mix of old hands and new blood. Since Umno is a major partner in the Barisan Nasional, where it leads, its partners should be expected to follow.