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Continuing legacy with change

IN his first official speech as Prime Minister in the Dewan Rakyat to move a motion of thanks to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi reiterated that he will continue the policies laid by previous leaders and build on their legacy of success. The emphasis on continuity is well-founded because these policies have contributed to the peace, stability and prosperity of this nation, and their retention are crucial for future progress and growth. Chopping and changing policies without any real need will have a destabilising effect. As Abdullah pointed out to Japanese journalists on Tuesday, he will not make changes if there is no need for them. For example, the 3.80 ringgit peg to the US dollar has been maintained because it has worked well for the country.

But as the Prime Minister said, nothing is cast in stone, and if the situation warrants it, changes will be made. He cannot certainly be accused of dogmatically sticking to tried-and-tested methods when different ways and more effective and efficient approaches can be found. The swift manner in which flood relief was distributed to thousands of farmers and money owed to contractors was disbursed are examples of the administrative fine-tuning which have been introduced to transform the work culture of the civil service.

The refusal to make changes for the sake of change exemplifies the character of the Prime Minister. He is not the proverbial new broom who has the overwhelming urge to sweep everything clean just to show who's the boss. In his speech to Parliament, Abdullah was mindful that he was God's "humble servant" who has been given a position of power as a trust and a test from God. In his interview with the Japanese journalists, he described himself as the nation's "number one servant". The priority given to the fight against corruption highlights the ethical underpinnings of his view that the premiership is not an office for personal glory but a guardianship that has to be carried out with integrity. A nation is in good hands when its leader puts national interest in first place.