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Raja Mohar the embodiment of excellence

Balan Moses

IF one were asked to describe the most outstanding facet of Raja Tun Mohar Raja Badiozaman's long and illustrious career in the public and private sectors, it would have to be his loyalty to jobs assigned to him.

And he has had his fair share of assignments over a career spanning 45 years and covering the terms of three Prime Ministers starting with Tun Razak Hussein.

He also served under the first Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra.

Each incoming prime minister reappointed the unassuming administrative whizz, who could always be expected to reach a settlement in negotiations with his low-key but authoritative manner.

The gentleman in him, a trait that would sparkle throughout his life, saw him stand head above shoulders over many of his peers.

This made him a good civil servant, and later a consummate company head in the private sector.

He accepted every task willingly. Even late into retirement, he accepted the post of Perusahaan Otomobil Kedua chairman, his last active private sector position.

One of the last official functions he attended was the launching of the new Perodua Kancil late last year.

He strove to excel in everything embarked upon with the trademark humility and quietude that has since come to be associated with the former economic adviser to successive governments.

He was not one to bask in glory and power.

On the contrary, he will be remembered as one of the most genteel of civil servants, always polite and respectful of all he came in contact with.

It was perhaps in his poise and regal manner - he was the great-grandson of Sultan Abdullah of Perak who was banished to the Seychelles after his purported role in the plot to kill James Birch - that people of all rank and age found comfort, and faith, in.

If the British had not exiled Sultan Abdullah, Raja Mohar could have been one of the Sultans of Perak. The loss to Perak's throne was the civil service's gain.

His philosophy towards work was built on a premise established early in life, that commitment to duty overrode everything with the exception, of course, of God and family.

"My hobby is working," he said at a function to mark his relinquishing the post of Malaysia Airlines chairman in 1991.

There was, of course, the attendant remark, which most would have expected of the silver-haired and soft-spoken man, that the management and staff should strive for excellence.

Excellence, and the furtherance of it, was another mark of the man who graduated from Oxford and Cambridge, a feat attributable to few in Malaysian history.

This rare quality saw the young Raja Mohar quickly inducted into civil service on his return from England where he was a contemporary of Razak.

Their friendship would continue to grow over the years until he was appointed economic adviser to the Government by Razak shortly after the 1969 riots, which led to the formulation of the New Economic Policy.

In an interview then, he described this episode of his life succinctly, saying he merely answered a call to national service from Razak.

For Raja Mohar, there was no question of turning down an invitation to serve the people.

Born on March 23, 1922, his childhood in the royal town of Kuala Kangsar saw him enrol in a Malay primary school, proceeding later to secondary education at the Clifford School in the town.

It is said that his grandmother had ostensibly sent him to these schools to help develop his touch with the common folk while his older brother, Raja Zahar, also a brilliant scholar, went to the Malay College Kuala Kangsar.

It may have been this association with the common folk that engendered his life-long love for service to the people.

He also spent a quick year at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar as an administrative cadet trainee before proceeding, on the eve of World War II, to the Raffles College in Singapore.

His batchmates in the journey south included Royal Professor Ungku Aziz.

He then left for England where he studied Economics in Cambridge besides completing a post-graduate course in Agricultural Economics in Oxford.

He returned in 1953 to serve as an economic research officer for three years in the Rural Industrial Development Authority.

Between then and 1957, he worked, among other things, as the economic officer for Penang.

Shortly after the clock at the Sultan Abdul Samad sounded midnight and the dawn of a new day in Malaysian history, he became the controller of the trade division of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

It was the right job for the enterprising young noble who rose through the ranks to become the secretary-general of the ministry.

On Jan 2, 1971, he was promoted to the senior post of Finance Ministry secretary-general.

The job was just one of the jewels in his administrative crown, which saw him helming innumerable government committees.

In 1972, he became Employees Provident Fund chairman, assuming the chairmanship of MAS, a post he would hold for a record 18 years, the next year.

The same year, he met Chinese Premier Zhou EnLai as Razak's personal representative, an encounter that led to the latter's historic visit to China.

Between 1975 and 1981, he was the economic adviser to Tun Hussein Onn, who succeeded Tun Razak, performing the same role with distinction for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

His years as Petronas chairman were also as eventful, and some might argue more momentous, than his tenure in Government and the private sector.

His prowess in negotiating particularly thorny issues or those that required tact and diplomacy is legendary.

A case in point would be the manner in which his services were called in when Petronas was negotiating production sharing rights with international petroleum giants.

With his shrewd and firm but ever courteous visage, he succeeded in getting the big names in petroleum, including Shell and Esso, to sign production sharing contracts.

The master mediator, it is said, came to the rescue when talks broke down, using his negotiating skills to bolster the Malaysian position.

Meanwhile, he played the role of husband and father with ease.

At one official function to mark the conferment of a honorary doctorate, he is said to have attributed his success to his family.

But if anyone thought that this made him any easier on them, they would be disappointed.

He expected the best from them in all fields of endeavour but supported their efforts all the way with love and concern as his widow Toh Puan Norella Talib and children Raja Noor Dunita, Raja Nor Mazli and son Raja Mazhar will testify. Raja Nor Dina, the eldest child of the couple, died two years ago.

The plaudits and accolades that Raja Mohar was honoured with in his lifetime were a testimony to his talent.

He was conferred the Seri Setia Mahkota in 1992, which carried the title Tun.

He had been made a Tan Sri in 1976. There were also several foreign awards and medals given by governments.

He was named the recipient of the Tun Razak Foundation Award in 1983, the Anugerah Tokoh Ma'al Hijrah 1414H in 1993 and the National Productivity Award by the Asian Productivity Organisation in 1993.

The Malaysia-Japan Economic Association appointed him life president in recognition of his service at its helm.

He was also Universiti Teknologi Petronas chancellor, a role he revelled in as education was always close to his heart.

If ever there was a fault in him, it is said that this would be his abhorrence to haste in anything he did. His was the time-tested formula of diligence coupled with hard work.

The death of the quintessential government servant marks the end of the tradition of the old Malayan Civil Service.

He will go down in Malaysian history as the embodiment of the civil servant with integrity, placing service to the nation on a pedestal.