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Substance in style

IT has now become commonplace to say that when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi succeeds Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister, what will change is the style of leadership rather than the substance of policy. Abdullah himself has taken great pains to reiterate his commitment to a continuity in policy and to emphasise that his vision for Malaysia are those very ideals that have been expressed in Vision 2020. Much has been said about his leadership style, but what is sometimes overlooked is the substance within it. He constantly complements the theme of continuity with the theme of change. In a landmark speech to the Oxbridge Society early this month, he stressed the need for "changes in the way we do things and in the way we manage our country... Most importantly, we need to think differently."

His speeches and actions over the last few months on a broad range of issues exemplify the style and the substance. In rebuking the Road Transport Department over its mishandling of accidents which lead to death on the highways, he made it clear that there has to be better execution of policy. In directing the Employees Provident Fund to investigate fraudulent withdrawals, he sent a strong signal that corrupt tendencies and the abuse of public trust have to be checked. In his stand on the politicisation of the Sekolah Agama Rakyat, he has shown that he is determined to stem the signs of intolerance and exclusion that are beginning to emerge from a narrow prescription of Islam.

In these and other recent examples, Abdullah has shown that in doing it his way, he will be doing it with a high sense of national interest and purpose.