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Transparency personified

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TODAY Malaysians celebrate three sons of the soil who personified integrity during the course of their mortal existence. Former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, former Finance Minister Tun Tan Siew Sin and former Bank Negara governor Tun Ismail Ali willed themselves to tread the straight and narrow path that few take.

They favoured, and lived, exemplary lives. Though they are no more, their legacy of selfless service to the nation lives on.

The manner in which they chose to conduct themselves, both publicly and in private, is part of local lore. They will most certainly be seen in history as prime examples of honour, good governance and stewardship who were outraged by the very thought of inefficiency and corruption.

It was a choice they made to live a life that was in many ways severe, but perfectly suited to the needs of a fledgling nation.

Often, they were forced to merge their professional and personal agendas for the greater good of the nation, a fact that almost always led to sacrifices of a personal nature.

But they toiled on with nary a thought to private pursuits, however noble or necessary they may have been.

Dr Ismail, Tan and Ismail Ali had authority over many but exercised it with prudence and wisdom - they knew authority was not an end in itself but only a means to achieving it.

Their seemingly cold, curt and abrupt manner may have ruffled feathers, hurt countless egos and even reduced a few to mortal fear of them.

There are numerous stories of how they literally instilled the fear of God in their subordinates and, sometimes, even others who had the misfortune of getting on their wrong side.

But in hindsight even those who bear the scars of these encounters will agree that their behaviour was not born of meanness or lack of humanity.

They proved their concern time and again for every citizen, regardless of colour or creed, by fiercely guarding the welfare of the country.

Today's successes are no doubt the dividends from the human capital invested by pioneering individuals like these three.

Their gruff exterior and pe-remptory attitude hid hearts of gold that only a chosen few had a glimpse of, but many knew instinctively.

And it is for their contribution to the ethical and physical fabric of the nation that they are being honoured by the Kuala Lumpur Society for Transparency and Integrity.

This may also serve to introduce their ideals to a generation of young Malaysians who were not born when the three were in the prime of their lives.

This should be a necessary, if not vital, part of their education in good citizenship and individual responsibility.

That Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been requested to present the awards to the family representatives of these men speaks volumes in itself.

There is little to argue with the premise that the Prime Minister himself is made from the same mould as the three who are being remembered posthumously.

Theirs, and Dr Mahathir's, is a higher calling that goes beyond the normal call of duty. Their rare ethos leads to the inevitable question: What is it that separates them from the myriad men and women who have

served the nation in one way or the other over the ages?

The New Straits Times spoke to the children of Dr Ismail, Tan and Ismail for an idea of why their fathers turned out the way they did.

The extraordinary story that emerges is one of ordinary men who set aside personal life and career enrichment for selfless service to a young nation in its hour of need.

They put their hand to the yoke at a time when doing so could have been a liability, given the vagaries of political survival. Yet, they persevered, setting their sights on the greater good of the people.

And, in successfully doing so, and subsequently passing the baton on to successors, they have assumed images that will become the stuff of legends.

There seems to be a common thread - of parsimony, punctiliousness, exactitude and righteousness - that weaves its way through their lives.

Indeed, it seems as though there was an unspoken pact between the three to abide by values like accountability, perfection and meticulousness.

Some who knew, or worked with them, may even have complained that they sometimes took their ethical regimen to preposterous levels.

But then, history is replete with examples of men who set impossible targets for themselves so that they could achieve something more than the merely possible.

There was also another common characteristic that only their immediate family was intimately aware of - they treasured their wives and revelled in their children.

Their success on the professional front was testimony to the strength they gained from successful marriages and the implicit trust of spouses and children.

There was little by way of dissent or even raised eyebrows from their wives to their often unorthodox lifestyles and incongruous manner, their children say.

Toh Puan Norashikin, Toh Puan Catherine Lim Cheong Neo and Toh Puan Maimunah Abdul Latiff, indeed helped smooth the edges that may have left gashes in their husbands' professional relationships.

On the personal front, the wives enjoyed an excellent relationship, amply reflected in the fact that they were a team serving their husbands in the way they knew best.

For all their larger-than-life profiles, Dr Ismail, Tan and Ismail Ali were mere men who tried to overcome the vicissitudes of life the best way they knew. And they succeeded.