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Wisdom of knowing when to leave

IT is an essential lesson learnt very early in life: never to overstay one's welcome. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who remembers this well from his childhood, uses this to gauge his effectiveness as a leader.

You must "get the feel", he said in an interview published yesterday. You must know whether people still want you around. This is why he is determined on the right timing. "Don't wait until you're hated," he said.

But how many of us "get the feel"? Even if we are sensitive to such matters, we find all manner of justifications to hang on. Long-serving leaders, sometimes for good and valid reasons, persuade themselves to stay one more term or one more year, before stepping down.

Like the Prime Minister, they must learn to recognise the signs. They must know, as he says, that "even if you have done well, you should be prepared to accept the fact that somebody else may do better".

Indeed, it takes tremendous humility and courage to be able to say: I have done my best and now it is time to pass the baton. It is in the nature of things that even when you're running a good race, the baton must eventually be passed on.

If Dr Mahathir has set the example, as did the late Tun Hussein Onn before him, veterans of the various political parties must do the same.

Give way to the younger chaps. Allow the electorate to choose more energetic leaders. Just an offering of one dish, year after year, term after term, can be unappetising. When incumbents hang on for too long, some people may even be persuaded to support the devil they don't know, rather than the one they have been used to.

All leaders, at all levels, would naturally want to leave their mark. When they make way for the younger generation, when they lend support to new faces and create room for others, they will be remembered beyond the realm of their constituencies. They then elevate themselves to a higher position, that of statesmen to be remembered for all time.