

I want to do my best for all Malaysians

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CONGRATULATED on his Education Minister appointment, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed smiles warmly and says: "I will try to do a good job — for all Malaysians."

Has he a plan of action worked out? He has, but not a rigid one. And the first part of the plan consists of listening and learning.

This is his first Cabinet post and he will need a period of "acclimatisation". Besides, he does not believe in an inflexible approach to problems.

"True, I know something about education and have my own ideas on it. But I do not imagine I know everything."

So he will hold discussions with the staff of his Ministry and with students and teachers, look into their difficulties and dissatisfactions and give due weight to their ideas.

"I am not moving in to give orders. By and large I will be guided by the thinking of people involved in education in this country."

member of the Higher Education Advisory Council and chairman of the University Council of Universiti Kebangsaan. What is his view of the Universities and University Colleges Act?

He is aware of the feelings of some students regarding this Act and is willing to meet them for a discussion. If they can convince him that the Act curtails academic freedom, he is prepared to move to uphold that freedom.

Academic freedom, however, must not be confused with licence to act or to influence others to act in ways that threaten the basic ideals of Malaysian society.

Dialogue

He looks forward to a dialogue which will clear away misapprehensions on both sides. A country like Malaysia needs young intelligentsia who can think freely, clearly and originally, uninfluenced equally by old prejudices and new fallacies and fads.

Still on higher education—does he agree with

corrected. There are people who are totally unsuited for science, and they should be given the opportunity to study in a stream of their choice.

However, Malaysia must have more scientists and technologists to progress and be competitive. While aptitudes should be considered, the decision to do arts or science cannot be left entirely to children.

He adds with a smile: "Given complete freedom to choose, most children will choose not to study at all! Let's face it: we do compel them to study. Since we do this, we might as well try to determine what they should study."

Producing scientists and technologists is not

business studies cannot ensure success if the person concerned fails to place a high enough value on team work and human relations.

Most of our failures in business can be traced to this. This is where the Japanese are so far ahead of us."

The roles

Dr. Mahathir feels that value-orientation is one of the Government's most important roles and that this should be brought within the scope of education.

Values, he holds, greatly influence the very decision to remain in school or to drop out. A community which does not place a high value

Education under Dr. Mahathir promises to be interesting — but not in the sensational way some people hope or fear. Examine his speeches and actions past and present with a mind unbiased by the old game of political labelling, and the man emerges reassuringly reasonable.

In education circles his appointment is no big surprise. It is not just as member of the Higher Education Advisory Board and chairman of the University Council of Universiti Kebangsaan that he has participated in this country's education. His contribution in an unofficial capacity has been considerable and continuous for the past 15 years and more.

Informed sources say his ideas have gone into shaping some of the major policies in education. The same sources add he would have been Education Minister much earlier if he had won in the 1969 elections.

People who have worked with and for him, including those from FIMA (Food Industries of Malaysia) of which he has been chairman since

Dr. Mahathir

Mohamed

Fundamentally of course he will stick to the policies already set up by the Government. On the national language, for instance. He believes firmly in a single language creating a single nationality.

Language

"So long as we are without that language in the fullest sense, so long shall we be divided. The place of the National Language in the education system is not something to be debated or bargained about."

And what about the freedom—and the opportunity—to study other local languages?

"That too is beyond question," says Dr. Mahathir with quiet emphasis.

As for English, he stresses its usefulness as an extra tool for acquiring knowledge and technology. Young Malaysians must master this language—and for certain fields other languages as well—to hold their own in the modern world.

Dr. Mahathir is a

educationists who fear we are producing too many graduates? What about the danger of graduate unemployment?

"We are still in the process of finding out our exact requirements in graduates in various fields. What is obvious is that we need more specialist teachers, agriculturalists, technologists, scientists, doctors, engineers.

"We also need organisers, managers, people with very good general education who can adapt their knowledge and skills to different situations.

"Until we have filled these needs — which keep expanding with the rapid development — we should not worry about producing excess graduates or about graduate unemployment. Some graduates are choosy about jobs, but that is another matter."

About the emphasis on science and technology — what does he think of the practice of channelling good students into science even when their inclination is towards arts?

He concedes that mistakes may have been made. These must be

talks to Adibah Amin

just a matter of facilities but, even more vitally, of values. Values must be changed from the very start of school life. And the change must begin with the teachers, for unless the teachers are themselves convinced, they cannot convince the children.

In fact, whatever field a young Malaysian is to enter, his values must be orientated to fit him for that field in particular and for modern living in general.

"You can spend thousands giving a chap a diploma or a degree, but if his value system remains unsuited to the modern environment, your money has largely been wasted."

He gives the example of modern business. A pile of certificates in

on education will have a higher dropout rate than one which does.

"But then we must ask ourselves: is staying on in school necessarily a good thing? Aren't there, for some children, more suitable alternatives than the book education provided in our schools?"

"People have been successful in life with little or no formal education. For some youngsters it may be best to leave school fairly early and go into employment, thus gathering experience which is itself a form of education.

All these things must be looked into. In dealing with the future of our children, we cannot take anything for granted."

November 1972, say he is a rational and fair-minded person who believes in discussion and consensus. His weakness—if it is a weakness—is refusal to overlook inefficiency in anyone, however highly placed.

Grateful

He admits with a rueful smile that he is a stickler for good work. Perhaps, he says, this is due to his strict upbringing by a teacher-father who was as much a teacher at home as in school. He did not appreciate it much at the time, but he grew up to be grateful for that upbringing.

There were 10 children and not much money to spare; he remembers walking home from school on hot tarred roads that were not very kind to his bare feet; but the firm discipline at home helped them all to make something of themselves.

His wife Dr. Hasmah—as soft-spoken and gently humorous as he is—says he runs their home