

Dynamic Dr M shows the way

By Ruby Khoo

HIS style may be atypical, it may be controversial, it may sometimes seem cold. Indeed, he has been called a "cold fish" but when you get right down to the heart of the politician, what he does not appear to be, is uncaring.

When Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad concluded his first Cabinet meeting as the Prime Minister of Malaysia, he disappointed the circling journalists by telling them that the two things that had been decided were that the cities needed more trees and that public toilets had to get cleaner.

How uncontroversial, they must have thought with chagrin, how banal, how unlike the man. Yet, if one compares these first Cabinet decisions with the PM's later pronouncements on the global front, one realises that those early statements on seemingly "small" matters are as typical of the man as are his recent declarations on bigger or worldly issues.

Never has the PM wavered from speaking his mind on matters that he cares about, regardless of its popularity or how well-received it may be, or of any public or world sentiment or expectations, irrespective of the big or small waves it makes and no matter what the backlash may be.

He has faced continuing criticism from men-in-the-street, men-at-work and those home alone. He has been judged, interpreted and condemned by political factions, newspapers and magazines and has provoked the displeasure of major countries and their leaders, getting a little crabby, as a result.

No doubt it's the kind of thing, more or less, that political leaders (some more than others) seem to be primarily prone to. As former and current Australian Prime Ministers Malcolm Fraser and Paul Keating

cific family" or a "Pacific *Gemeinschaft* (German word referring to a sense of kinship or community as within a family or a group of friends)".

"I am a great respecter," Dr Mahathir has said, "of what some have called 'this vision thing'. There is of course a great danger in grand idealism wedded to grand illusions. Great visions can sometimes get in the way of the day-to-day things that we must do today, that are urgent, that brook no delay.

"But there is no virtue in activity without purpose. There can be little satisfaction in mileage without milestones and distance without a destination. There is no sense in getting quickly to places we do not want to go."

A purposeful workaholic, the PM combines his work ethics with a clear and determined, some say opinionated, sense of direction.

More than nine years ago, a profile of Dr Mahathir in the *New York Times* described his message to the West: "that there is a new Third World that no longer fits the old stereotypes and that it is time the First World came to terms with it. It is a world of experimentation with new systems of society and government that accepts neither the East nor the West wholly as models."

It also observed, among others, that the PM promotes both Islamic values and advanced technology, Eastern culture and Western capitalism and is bitterly critical of the American Press because it is dominated by big businesses and controlled by editors who determine the slant.

If the PM was eyed curiously but not very seriously then, he is being taken with much less salt but more consternation today, as he has, to put it in the words of another article, "established himself as a spokesman for the Third World.

well know, mere one-liners can make headlines and boomerang.

Even irreproachable ones. "Life wasn't meant to be easy," Fraser reminded his very easy-going countrymen during his time and promptly became the punch-line of a brand-new genre of laid-back jokes and satire.

Presidents, prime ministers and "all the King's men" know how policies — no matter how "good-looking" they are flat out in print — can backfire and tax one by rapidly assuming quicksand properties once off the paper. President Clinton can testify to this but he is not alone. Prime Minister John Major, who is digging in at No 10, Downing Street, has found his simple back-to-basics policy to be as manageable as a minefield.

Not lacking either heart or controversy, and in spite of the latter, Dr Mahathir, who has been called an "outsider", stands out among politicians, because of the results he has wrought. Having managed a peaceful, stable and increasingly prosperous and capable country, the PM is still trying to do more when many leaders have yet to achieve the former:

But then he has never cared to merely record the status quo, instead he cares, passionately some say, that Malaysia becomes a success story. His hopes and strategies for that, in a nutshell, is *Vision 2020*.

His visions however, go beyond that to a "strong Pa-

raising Malaysia's profile and influence beyond its size."

Moreover, Dr Mahathir's mettle has been tested by time. His *Buy British Last or Look East* policies, which looked like rash, even brash, knee-jerk remedies, seem in hindsight, to have had been imbued with political and economic sense.

Those who initially poo-pooed the concept of a national car must now contend with the fact that the Malaysian car industry has cornered the local market and has made inroads into motor markets overseas.

Recently, during an official visit to France, the PM chose to talk about how it takes two to transact a technology transfer: one to make the offer and the other to earnestly accept that offer.

There would be no point, he stressed, for such technology transfers if Malaysians did not care enough to master it. There is nothing difficult or magical about these technologies, the PM said, all it requires is a deep interest in such know-how and to make efforts to acquire them. If we strive hard, he said, we can acquire the technology to build spacecrafts or rockets.

When he is not pushing Malaysians forward, mostly by example (even when he goes abroad), Dr Mahathir has often cared to champion the cause of countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina, pressing principal countries to end the ceaseless carnage and conflict that is tearing the region apart.