

Abdullah: Vote along party lines

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KUALA LUMPUR: Barisan Nasional backbenchers in Parliament must stick to convention and cannot vote according to their conscience but only along party lines.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is BN chairman and Umno president, said the system had worked well for Malaysia and would be maintained.

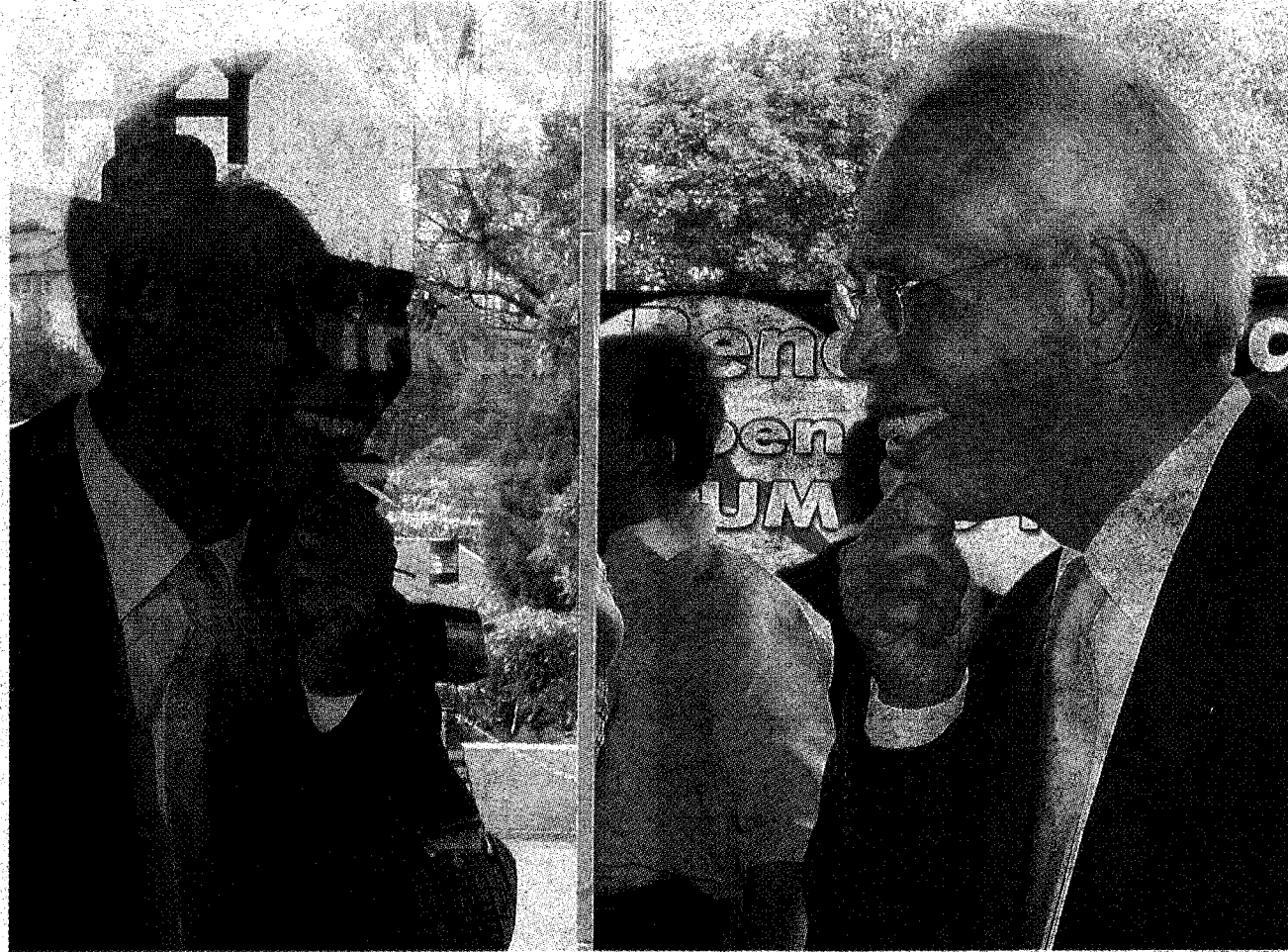
The backbenchers, who had hours earlier sought to be allowed to vote autonomously on certain issues, fell into line with Abdullah's firm instruction on the matter. But they harbour hopes of meeting the Prime Minister to discuss it further.

"We have our own democracy and we will follow it. We have survived with this democracy and we will continue with it," Abdullah said when it was pointed out that other democratic countries' Parliaments, such as the House of Commons in England, allowed MPs from the ruling party to support motions tabled by Opposition MPs.

He said every party member, including MPs from the BN component parties, has to understand and adhere to party discipline.

"All party members have rules that they must understand and follow. There is discipline for each member. There is no compromise or exception given to anyone to do as they wish. That's the party rule," Abdullah said after chairing the Umno supreme council meeting yesterday.

The Prime Minister's statement was accepted by BN Backbenchers Club members contacted last night, even



Shahrir in a reflective mood at the Putra World Trade Centre for the supreme council meeting yesterday.

though they had decided at a meeting in Parliament earlier that they should be allowed to vote according to their conscience rather than along party lines in cases where there is no directive from the Whip.

MP for Kota Baru Datuk Zaid Ibrahim said backbenchers had no choice but to abide by what their leaders wanted.

"We were only asking for flexibility on some issues. We have voted on all government

Bills without any problem. Voting according to conscience is allowed in Parliaments which practise the Westminster style of democracy. In Britain, Prime Minister Tony Blair, for instance, has been defeated on some issues on the death penalty by Labour party members," he said.

BN Backbenchers Club vice-chairman Tan Sri Dr Ting Chew Peh said while members would have to abide by the

Prime Minister's directive, the matter could be discussed further.

The 90-minute club meeting, which centred on the status of its chairman, Datuk Shahrir Samad, decided that they wanted more autonomy when voting on motions brought before the House, regardless of who brought those motions.

"It is the duty of the party Whip (Deputy Prime Minister and BN deputy chairman

Datuk Seri Najib Razak) to tell us when to follow the party line.

"But in the absence of his direction, the general rule is that MPs are to vote according to their conscience in serving their constituencies and country," club secretary Datuk Rosli Mat Hassan said.

Club members also said they still considered Shahrir as their chairman, despite his resignation being accepted by Najib three days ago.

Shahrir's quit decision came after he did not get the backing of the other BN MPs in the Dewan Rakyat for his move to support a motion by DAP leader Lim Kit Siang to refer the *New Straits Times* to the Rights and Privileges Committee over a report implicating an unnamed MP who had asked Customs to "close one eye" on the import of sawn timber from Indonesia through Sungai Rambai port in Malacca.

Datuk Mohd Said Yusof (BN-Jasin) later admitted he was the MP in question.

The club committee also agreed that Said should not be referred to the Rights and Privileges Committee because "there was no breach of parliamentary privilege".

Rosli, however, said this did not imply that the matter should not be investigated or that Said was above the law.

He said the club was of the opinion that the matter was best left to the relevant authorities such as the police or the Anti-Corruption Agency, and the Rights and Privileges Committee was not the appropriate forum as it would not only usurp the functions of the relevant authorities, but was also *ultra vires*, as the committee was not empowered to do so.

Shahrir, meanwhile, said everyone had made a mistake in the turn of events last Thursday.

"The Speaker made a mistake. The Opposition leader made a mistake. Those who supported it and those who were against it were also wrong."

Shahrir said he, too, was wrong to have resigned his club post. "The whole situation was wrong. Hopefully, some right comes out of this."