

> TUN ISMAIL MOHAMED ALI

Epitome of towering Malaysian

NST-14/5/2007.

THE reminder to Tunku Abdul Aziz to be "efficient to the point of ruthlessness" ("A man of uncompromising perfection" — NST, May 6) was an apt reminder of Tun Ismail Mohamed Ali, one of Malaysia's foremost institution builders. I can relate to it as I was secretary to the Board of Bank Negara Malaysia (1970-1972).

Ismail was indeed a man of impeccable integrity, a true blue professional and a leader who led by example.

He single-handedly transformed Bank Negara into a premier institution. Today, BNM has a solid reputation regionally and internationally for its competence in monetary policy and management.

Ismail demanded very high standards from his staff right down to the security guards and gardeners.

While focused on the core business of central banking, housekeeping matters like the toilets, office cleanliness and general maintenance of the bank's buildings, including lifts and other assets, never eluded him.

They were part and parcel of the organic culture and discipline which he sought to inculcate in each and every employee.

Attention to detail and thoroughness in performance became second nature to all.

Many a time, even late at night, I was instructed to accompany him for surprise



The late Tun Ismail Mohamed Ali was a man well-known for his integrity and uncompromising stance on efficiency.

checks on the bank's security system, including the guards on duty.

He would also summon me to accompany him for on-the-spot inspections of toilets, lifts and corridors.

He would visit the tellers in the banking hall and the note counters in the basement. He never took anything for granted.

His modus operandi was to exact the best out of the staff with excruciating "why and what if" questions, prompting them to always anticipate any eventuality and "think outside the box".

In the core business of central banking, he devoted a lot of his time to identifying and developing competent staff. All new officers would have at least a 30-minute face-to-face encounter with him where he would explain his vision for the bank.

The quality of the bank's

financial and economic advice to the government was uppermost for him.

He created a high-quality Economic Research Department with some of the most outstanding economists who could match the intellectual and conceptual capacity of those at the Treasury, the Economic Planning Unit, the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

He jealously guarded the bank from being diverted to non-core businesses such as insurance, special funding programmes and capital market issues.

For him, the bank should remain focused on what it did best: To maintain price stability and integrity of the currency, ensure prudent management of national reserves and the development of a sound and strong banking and financial system.

He was a truly amazing

man. Despite his erudition, he was down to earth in the management of the central bank as an institution.

Not many people know that he was a Queen's Scholar at Cambridge in the era of Alfred Marshall and John Maynard Keynes and went on to do law at Middle Temple.

During World War Two, he was a familiar voice over the Malay Service of the BBC from London.

He was known to and interacted with the best minds of his generation in central banking.

To my mind, this great Malaysian was also foremost an intellectual with a voracious appetite for classics, law and politics.

His favourite philosopher was Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, India's president (1961-67), whose book, *An Idealist View of Life*, had an enormous influence on his worldview. His favourite novelist was William Somerset Maugham, whose style of writing and excellent prose Ismail emulated.

It is time our civil servants emulated this former civil servant, diplomat (minister counsellor in Washington), and central banker for his professionalism and integrity. As an administrator and policy formulator, Ismail was always hands-on and dedicated.

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