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By **TUN DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD**

READING and writing have always been issues close to my heart. I think many of us take the ability to read and write for granted — we think it is our birthright, as much as we believe that our freedom to speak and our freedom to choose are God-given rights as well.

In Malaysia, we have truly been fortunate that our government has made it mandatory, through the Education Act 1996, for all our children who have attained the age of six years to be enrolled in primary school, failing which parents can be fined or sent to jail.

Despite that, illiteracy still plagues small pockets of our society. According to the National Education Blueprint 2006-10 which was released in Jan 2006, some four per cent of primary school students and 0.8 per cent of secondary school students had not mastered reading, writing and arithmetic.

Globally, according to the 2002 estimates by Unicef, an astounding 115 million children are out of school.

This serves to prove a point that despite our recent successes, more work needs to be done. As societies leap ahead, many people are left behind because they lack the necessary reading and writing skills. As reading and writing are foundational to learning, this means they would even lack the intellectual and emotional capacity that is necessary to bring them to higher levels of progress.

On a more macro perspective, illiteracy will slow down the process of nation building and frustrate government efforts in bringing about further development. Furthermore, our nation has always stressed on the importance of building a knowledge-and-innovation based society.



Knowledge is about information. Information is, more often than not, in written form. The pace is set by rapid technological change, which requires us to constantly update our skills.

While many are focusing on the high end of the knowledge-based economy, we cannot turn a blind eye to what lies at the grassroots. We presume that mandatory schooling will rectify the circumstances. As much as we have done, we find it simply

unimaginable that illiteracy is still prevalent.

Literacy is a subject that is very personal to me. Even at the Perdana Leadership Foundation, the Foundation researches and documents Malaysia's intellectual heritage — literacy being one of the subjects, in a hope to provide important resources and insights for future development.

I wish to congratulate Montblanc for spearheading this very meaningful and significant programme together with Unicef, and I am delighted to see it being applied to the local context.

I was approached by Montblanc to be part of the Power To Write campaign, which I thought was truly a noble gesture to support, and a wonderful programme initiated by Montblanc on a global level. I was not able to be present at the grand launch due to my doctor's instructions — that's why my dear wife represented me. But I am proud to be part of this effort. I must commend Montblanc for taking illiteracy seriously and I think more private organisations should follow the penmanship of Montblanc.

Let us continue in the same spirit of partnership and collaboration to combat illiteracy and develop the nations of the world. There is no shortcut to eradicating illiteracy. We must work together. As parents, politicians, publishers, businesses, charities — we all have a role to play. It should be everyone's business.

“
I've traveled the world twice over, Met the famous, saints and sinners, Poets and artists, kings and queens, Old stars and hopeful beginners, I've been where no-one's been before, Learned secrets from writers and cooks All with one library ticket To the wonderful world of books.
”

— Janice James

Power to write

THE Power To Write campaign is a global initiative by Montblanc to promote literacy among children. Montblanc will release a special-edition of its iconic Meisterstück 149 with an optional signature engraving bearing a well-known personality and packaged in a sleek black jacket touting the campaign slogan, “The Power To Write”.

In Malaysia, customers have the option of purchasing the Meisterstück 149 special edition bearing the signature of Tun Dr Mahathir or Datin Seri Tiara Jacqueline. For every pen sold until Dec 31, USD149 (approximately RM550) will be donated in support of Unicef education programmes in

Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Tun Dr Mahathir and Datin Seri Tiara join 149 personalities across the globe, from the worlds of politics, arts, culture, business, sports and entertainment in the fight against illiteracy.

For generations, the Montblanc Meisterstück 149 — launched in 1924 — has been the embodiment of the classical fountain pen, unsurpassed in design and perfection. Recently, the Museum Of Modern Art in New York recognised the Meisterstück 149 as a design classic and has placed the pen in its permanent display.

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