

If you think nice guys cannot survive the cut-throat world of politics, then you have not met Tan Sri Dr Mohd Yusoff Mohd Nor, the former Minister of Public Enterprise and the current chairman of Felda. He tells of his amazing jump from academia to politics and how he managed to be true to himself throughout.

By Sharmila Valli Narayanan

'NICE' is a word that is consistently used whenever Tan Sri Dr Mohd Yusoff Mohd Nor's name crops up. 'He is one of the nicest men that I have met,' gushes an admirer. 'He is very humble and has time for everyone who wants to see him. It is hard for him to say no, which can be construed as a weakness I suppose. I have never heard any of those working under him say anything bad about their boss.'

In person, the most striking feature about Mohd Yusoff is his face, which shines with kindness and serenity. In an age where being ruthless and cunning (think Donald Trump and Steve Job) is held up as virtues to be admired in a man, it is nice to meet a nice guy who has done well for himself because of his niceness'. Take his entry into politics for instance. The year was

1984 and Mohd Yusoff was the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. A few months earlier, he had had a chance meeting with the then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. They chatted about education and other matters.

Mohd Yusoff was having a staff meeting at the university when he was informed that Dr Mahathir would make a special announcement on his new Cabinet line-up. 'As academicians, we were all interested to find out who would be the Minister of Education. I was asked to adjourn the meeting so that everyone at the meeting could listen to the announcement. Like everyone else, I was glued to the radio and then the PM announced the name of the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department and it was my name! To say that I was shocked was an understatement. I had no idea at all that I was even being considered. My friends were all congratulating me and teasing me for being very secretive about it. Even my wife asked me how long I had known about it ... honestly, I didn't. It was a surprise,' he says still surprised at the turn of events that made a huge impact on his life.

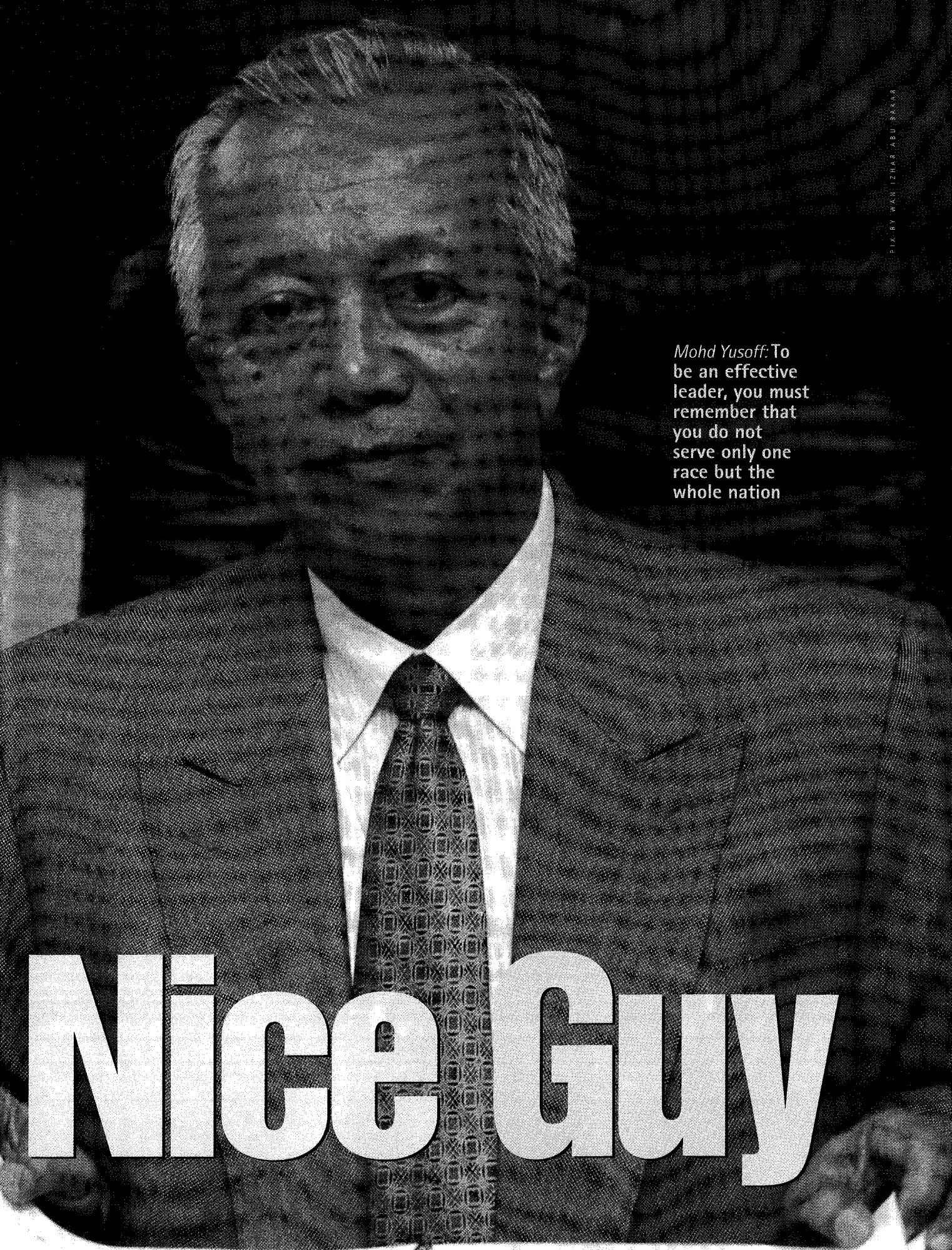
The PM was obviously happy with his performance because two years later, he was made the Minister of Public Enterprise, a position he held for five years. After his stint as a minister, he held various other positions before being named as Felda (Federal Land Development Authority) chairman in 2001. For someone who never aspired to be a politician, he has done well. 'He was a good minister who was liked by people from all walks of life,' reveals Idris Mamat, his former political secretary who has since become a friend. 'Because of his religious

background, he was accepted by most Malays. He is very approachable and a very good listener. He would listen patiently to his visitors' complaints and grouses, sometimes much to the annoyance of his staff because his schedule would be all messed up!'

The world of the academe and politics were far from Mohd Yusoff's early youthful dreams. When he was growing up in the backwaters of Terengganu, all he wanted to be was a writer. He went on to study Islamic philosophy in Egypt, where he got his masters. He eventually got a doctorate in philosophy. 'I had hoped that studying philosophy would make me a better writer,' he says with a laugh. Although he never became a writer, philosophy has helped him deal with the changes in his life, especially pertaining to his career. 'My PhD supervisor was an excellent man - an Egyptian who was trained in Germany. He gave me valuable advice: not to be confined to only one way of thinking and looking at things. I was happy being an academician and doing research. And then the position of managing university departments came along, which was a whole new ball game. After that it was politics and now Felda.'

The secret to coping with change, he says, is to adapt and adjust to new situations. 'You have to be realistic and understand the nature of the

Mr



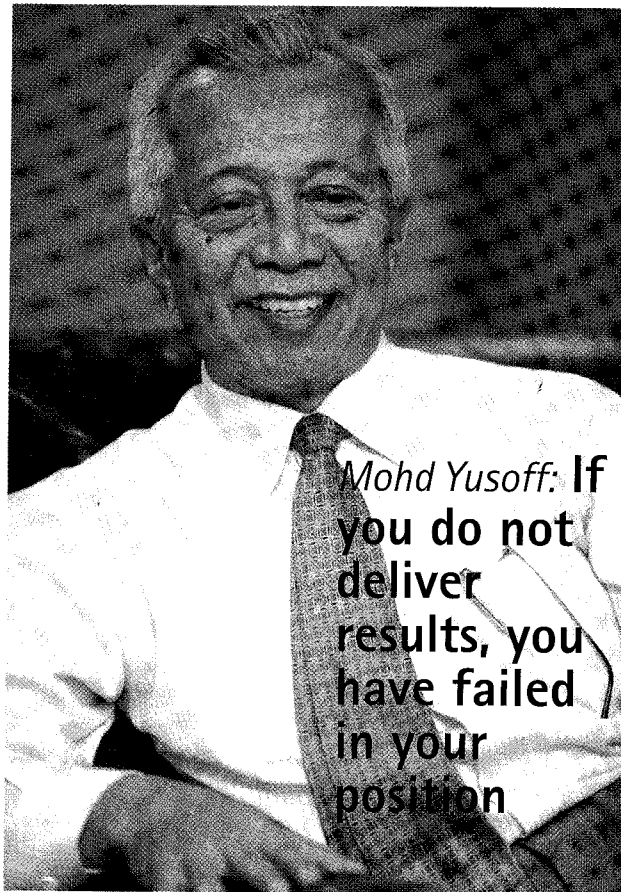
Mohd Yusoff: To be an effective leader, you must remember that you do not serve only one race but the whole nation

Nice Guy

situation you are in. In terms of career, you have to learn as quickly as you can and, most importantly, deliver because if you do not deliver results, you have failed in your position. Maybe philosophy has taught me how to manage when the winds of change blow my way,' he muses.

Right now, the winds of change have brought him to Felda. Felda celebrated its 50th anniversary in July. It is one of the most successful government agencies and Mohd Yusoff does not want Malaysians to forget what Felda has accomplished. 'When you look back and see what Felda has accomplished over the years, it's astounding! The vision that our second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak had for Felda and for the Malays especially was astounding. Our leaders had to change the mindset of the Malays, who had lived by the riverbanks for generations. They had to persuade them to move inland, near the fringes of jungles to start a whole new life by developing the land there. It was not easy, but Felda succeeded because the government had very good policies. We had a great management team to oversee the whole thing and the people were committed. In starting Felda, Tun Razak had commented that 'we have good land for good people'. The Felda settlers were good people because they had to work very hard,' he says very proudly.

Felda still has an important role to play in 21st Century Malaysia, says Mohd Yusoff. Felda is one of the largest producers of palm oil and has made significant inroads in discovering other uses for palm oil besides cooking. The nature of Felda settlements is also changing, says Mohd Yusoff. If once Felda settlements were considered isolated and backward, now they are being developed into small modern towns through the Felda Jaya schemes, the first of which will be in Mempaga in Bentong. This new Felda settlement will boast new houses with four bedrooms and will have other facilities found in small towns. 'We have planned



three Felda Jaya schemes. These new Felda towns will have commercial centres, SMEs, education and recreation centres. This is one way to stop the migration of young people to the urban area,' he explains. 'We have plans to make Felda a self-contained society because we are the only agency that has its own community of people. Of course, all this cannot be done by Felda alone but will require serious planning and coordination with other government agencies as well.'

Although there is plenty at Felda to keep him occupied and excited, Mohd Yusoff admits that sometimes, he does miss his political days. 'When I left the ministry, there were still a couple of plans that I had not completed. I wish I had seen them through.'

He has great admiration for our former prime minister. 'Dr Mahathir was a politician outside his office, but when he was in the office he was a damn good CEO who was on top of things. He was very aware of what all his ministers were saying to the Press. I remember once when I made a statement and it was reported in the Press. Early next morning, I got a call from

him telling me that my statement was premature because it had not been fully discussed yet! And when you make an appointment to see him, you had better make sure you are prepared because he won't talk ... he has no time for small talk and you are supposed to say to him whatever you have to. When he calls you for a meeting to ask about something concerning your ministry, you had better have the facts!'

Mohd Yusoff was an Umno Supreme Council member for 15 years. He was appointed to the council and was re-elected three times with the highest number of votes. 'I don't like camps,' confesses Mohd Yusoff. 'In politics, there are always special interest groups and some of them had approached me but I told them I was not interested. I am only interested in anything that helps the party and the country.'

In his large office, there is an arresting picture of a young Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

praying. The picture dates back to the 1970s. It is not surprising that one 'Mr Nice Guy' should admire another. Mohd Yusoff offers his views on Abdullah, who is now Prime Minister. 'Back in the days when Abdullah was not in the Cabinet, he never tried to lobby or manoeuvre to get back into it. He lived a simple life and the Umno delegates noticed this. They realised here was a man who was interested in offering his services to the party and country and had no intention of harming anyone. That was why they got him in again.'

Mohd Yusoff's advice for budding politicians is to be patient and not to move too fast. 'If you are in a hurry for positions, chances are you will risk alienating some people. If you get something by creating unnecessary rivalry, you will not last in that position because there will always be others to oust you. Be patient; getting things done via consensus is the best way to go,' he counsels.

His parting shot to would-be-leaders: 'To be an effective leader, you must remember that you do not serve only one race but the whole nation.' **mb**